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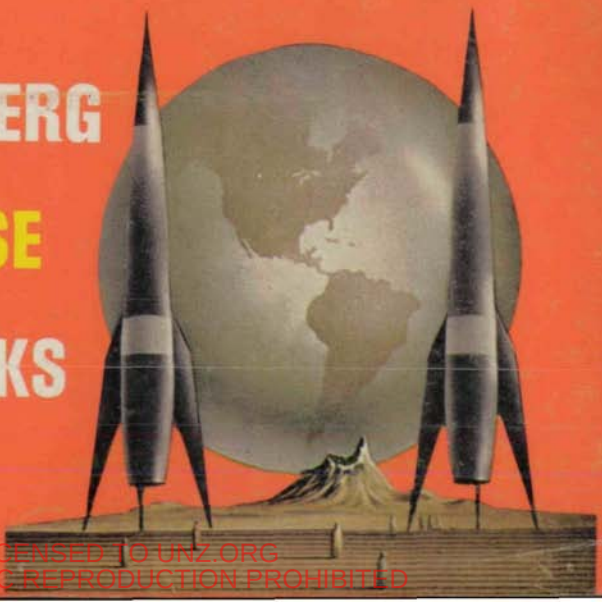

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THE MOST THRILLING

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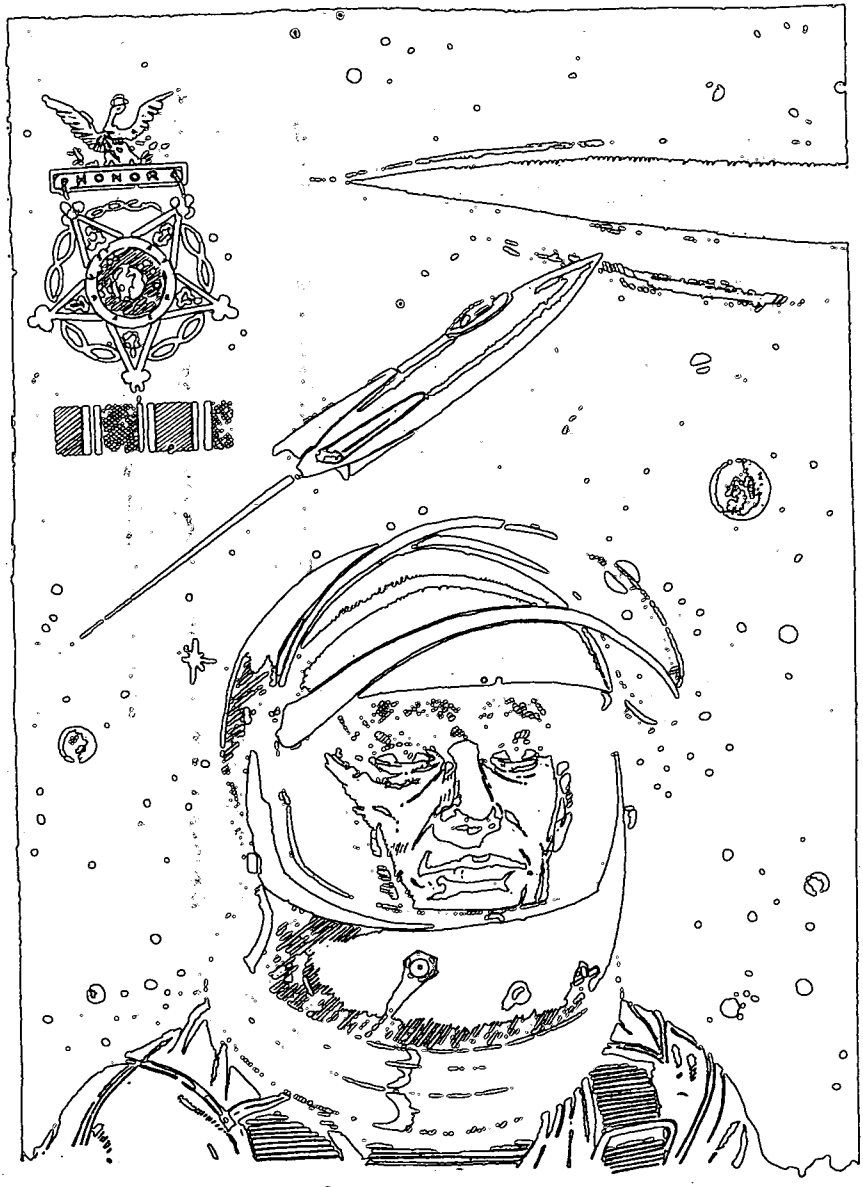

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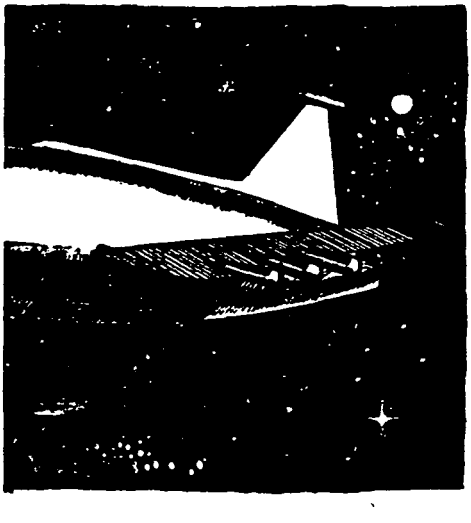

According to tradition, the man who held the Galactic Medal of Honor could do no wrong. In a strange way, Captain Don Mathers was to learn that this was true.

MEDAL OF HONOR

By MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATED by BERNKLAU

DON MATHERS snapped to attention, snapped a crisp salute to his superior, said, "Sub-lieutenant Donal Mathers reporting, sir."

The Commodore looked up at him, returned the salute, looked down at the report on the desk. He murmured, "Mathers, One Man Scout V-102. Sector A22-K223."

"Yes, sir," Don said.

The Commodore looked up at him again. "You've been out only five days, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, on the third day I seemed to be developing trouble in my fuel injectors. I stuck it out for a couple of days, but then decided I'd better come in

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for a check." Don Mathers added, "As per instructions, sir."

"Ummm, of course. In a Scout you can hardly make repairs in space. If you have any doubts at all about your craft, orders are to return to base. It happens to every pilot at one time or another."

"Yes, sir."

"However, Lieutenant, it has happened to you four times out of your last six patrols."

Don Mathers said nothing. His face remained expressionless.

"The mechanics report that they could find nothing wrong with your engines, Lieutenant."

"Sometimes, sir, whatever is wrong fixes itself. Possibly a spot of bad fuel. It finally burns out and you're back on good fuel again. But by that time you're also back to the base."

The Commodore said impatiently, "I don't need a lesson in the shortcomings of the One Man Scout, Lieutenant. I piloted one for nearly five years. I know their shortcomings—and those of their pilots."

"I don't understand, sir."

The Commodore looked down at the ball of his thumb. "You're out in space for anywhere from two weeks to a month. All alone. You're looking for Kraden ships which practically never turn up. In military history the only remotely similar situation I can think of were the pilots of World War One pursuit planes, in the early years of the war, when they still flew singly, not in formation. But even they were up there alone for only a couple of hours or so."

"Yes, sir," Don said meaninglessly.

The Commodore said, "We, here at command, figure on you fellows getting a touch of space cafard once in awhile and, ah, *imagining* something wrong in the engines and coming in. But," here the Commodore cleared his throat, "four times out of six? Are you sure you don't need a psych, Lieutenant?"

Don Mathers flushed. "No, sir, I don't think so."

The Commodore's voice went militarily expressionless. "Very well, Lieutenant. You'll have the customary three weeks leave before going out again. Dismissed."

Don saluted snappily, wheeled and marched from the office.

Outside, in the corridor, he muttered a curse. What did that chairborne brass hat know about space cafard? About the depthless blackness, the wretchedness of free fall, the tides of primitive terror that swept you when the animal realization hit that you were away, away, away from the environment that gave you birth. That you were alone, alone, *alone*. A million, a million-

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million miles from your nearest fellow human. Space cafard, in a craft little larger than a good sized closet! What did the Commodore know about it?

Don Mathers had conveniently forgotten the other's claim to five years service in the Scouts.

He made his way from Space Command Headquarters, Third Division, to Harry's Neuvo Mexico Bar. He found the place empty at this time of the day and climbed onto a stool.

Harry said, "Hi, Lootenant, thought you were due for a patrol. How come you're back so soon?"

Don said coldly, "You prying into security subjects, Harry?"

"Well, gee, no Lootenant. You know me. I know all the boys. I was just making conversation."

"Look, how about some more credit, Harry? I don't have any pay coming up for a week."

"Why, sure. I got a boy on the light cruiser *New Taos*. Any spaceman's credit is good with me. What'll it be?"

"Tequila."

Tequila was the only concession the Neuvo Mexico Bar made to its name. Otherwise, it looked like every other bar has looked in every land and in every era. Harry poured, put out lemon and salt.

Harry said, "You hear the news this morning?"

"No, I just got in."

"Colin Casey died." Harry shook his head. "Only man in the system that held the Galactic Medal of Honor. Presidential proclamation, everybody in the system is to hold five minutes of silence for him at two o'clock, Sol Time. You know how many times that medal's been awarded, Lootenant?" Before waiting for an answer, Harry added, "Just thirty-six times."

Don added dryly, "Twenty-eight of them posthumously."

"Yeah." Harry, leaning on the bar before his sole customer, added in wonder, "But imagine. The Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong. Imagine. You come to some town, walk into the biggest jewelry store, pick up a diamond bracelet, and walk out. And what happens?"

Don growled, "The jewelry store owner would be over-reimbursed by popular subscription. And probably the mayor of the town would write you a letter thanking you for honoring his fair city by deigning to notice one of the products of its shops. Just like that."

"Yeah." Harry shook his head in continued awe. "And, imagine, if you shoot somebody you don't like, you wouldn't spend even a single night in the Nick."

Don said, "If you held the Medal of Honor, you wouldn't

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have to shoot anybody. Look, Harry, mind if I use the phone?"

"Go right ahead, Lootenant."

Dian Fuller was obviously in the process of packing when the screen summoned her. She looked into his face and said, surprised, "Why, Don, I thought you were on patrol."

"Yeah, I was. However, something came up."

She looked at him, a slight frown on her broad, fine forehead. "Again?"

He said impatiently, "Look, I called you to ask for a date. You're leaving for Callisto tomorrow. It's our last chance to be together. There's something in particular I wanted to ask you, Di."

She said, a touch irritated, "I'm packing, Don. I simply don't have time to see you again. I thought we said our goodbyes five days ago."

"This is important, Di,"

She tossed the two sweaters she was holding into a chair, or something, off-screen, and faced him, her hands on her hips.

"No it isn't, Don. Not to me, at least. We've been all over this. Why keep torturing yourself? You're not ready for marriage, Don. I don't want to hurt you, but you simply aren't. Look me up, Don, in a few years."

"Di, just a couple of hours this afternoon."

Dian looked him full in the face and said, "Colin Casey finally died of his wounds this morning. The President has asked for five minutes of silence at two o'clock. Don, I plan to spend that time here alone in my apartment, possibly crying a few tears for a man who died for me and the rest of the human species under such extreme conditions of gallantry that he was awarded the highest honor of which man has ever conceived. I wouldn't want to spend that five minutes while on a date with another member of my race's armed forces who had deserted his post of duty."

Don Mathers turned, after the screen had gone blank, and walked stiffly to a booth. He sank onto a chair and called flatly to Harry, "Another tequila. A double tequila. And don't bother with that lemon and salt routine."

An hour or so later a voice said, "You Sub-lieutenant Donal Mathers?"

Don looked up and snarled. "So what? Go away."

There were two of them. Twins, or could have been. Empty of expression, heavy of build. The kind of men fated to be ordered around at the pleasure of those with money, or brains, none of which they had or would ever have.

The one who had spoken said, "The boss wants to see you."

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"Who the hell is the boss?"

"Maybe he'll tell you when he sees you," the other said, patiently and reasonably.

"Well, go tell the boss he can go to the . . ..

The second of the two had been standing silently, his hands in his great-coat pockets. Now he brought his left hand out and placed a bill before Don Mathers. "The boss said to give you this."

It was a thousand unit note. Don Mathers had never seen a bill of that denomination before, nor one of half that.

He pursed his lips, picked it up and looked at it carefully. Counterfeiting was a long lost art. It didn't even occur to him that it might be false.

"All right," Don said, coming to his feet. "Let's go see the boss, I haven't anything else to do and his calling card intrigues me."

At the curb, one of them summoned a cruising cab with his wrist screen and the three of them climbed into it. The one who had given Don the large denomination bill, dialed the address and they settled back.

"So what does the boss want with me?" Don said.

They didn't bother to answer.

The Interplanetary Lines building was evidently their destination. The car whisked them up to the penthouse which topped it, and they landed on the terrace.

Seated in beach chairs, an autobar between them, were two men. They were both in their middle years. The impossibly corpulent one, Don Mathers vaguely recognized. From a newscast? From a magazine article? The other could have passed for a video stereotype villain, complete to the built-in sneer. Few men, in actuality either look like or sound like the conventionalized villain. This was an exception, Don decided.

He scowled at them. "I suppose one of you is the boss," he said.

"That's right," the fat one grunted. He looked at Don's two escorts. "Scotty, you and Rogers take off."

They got back into the car and left.

The vicious faced one said, "This is Mr. Lawrence Demming. I am his secretary."

Demming puffed, "Sit down, Lieutenant. What'll you have to drink? My secretary's name is Rostoff. Max Rostoff. Now we all know each other's names. That is, assuming you're Sub-Lieutenant Donal Mathers."

Don said, "Tequila."

Max Rostoff dialed the drink for him and, without being asked, another cordial for his employer.

Don placed Demming now. Lawrence Demming, billionaire. Robber baron, he might have

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been branded in an earlier age. Transportation baron of the solar system. Had he been a pig he would have been butchered long ago, he was going unhealthily to grease.

Rostoff said, "You have identification?"

Don Mathers fingered through his wallet, brought forth his I.D. card. Rostoff handed him his tequila, took the card and examined it carefully, front and back.

Demming huffed and said, "Your collar insignia tells me you pilot a Scout. What sector do you patrol, Lieutenant?"

Don sipped at the fiery Mexican drink, looked at the fat man over the glass. 'That's military information, Mr. Demming."

Demming made a move with his plump lips. "Did Scotty give you a thousand unit note?" He didn't wait for an answer. "You took it. Either give it back or tell me what sector you patrol, Lieutenant."

Don Mathers was aware of the fact that a man of Demming's position wouldn't have to go to overmuch effort to acquire such information, anyway. It wasn't of particular importance.

He shrugged and said, "A22-K223. I fly the V-102."

Max Rostoff handed back the I.D. card to Don and picked up a Solar System sector chart from the short legged table that set between the two of them and checked it. He said, "Your information was correct, Mr. Demming. He's the man."

Demming shifted his great bulk in his beach chair, sipped some of his cordial and said, "Very well. How would you like to hold the Galactic Medal of Honor, Lieutenant?"

Don Mathers laughed. "How would you?" he said.

Demming scowled. "I am not jesting, Lieutenant Mathers. I never jest. Obviously, I am not of the military. It would be quite impossible for me to gain such an award. But you are the pilot of a Scout."

"And I've got just about as much chance of winning the Medal of Honor as I have of giving birth to triplets."

The transportation magnate wiggled a disgustingly fat finger at him, "I'll arrange for that part of it."

Don Mathers goggled him. He blurted finally, "Like hell you will. There's not enough money in the system to fiddle with the awarding of the Medal of Honor. There comes a point, Demming, where even *your* dough can't carry the load."

Demming settled back in his chair, closed his eyes and grunted, "Tell him."

Max Rostoff took up the ball. "A few days ago, Mr. Demming and I flew in from Io on one of

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the Interplanetary Lines freighters. As you probably know, they are completely automated. We were alone in the craft."

"So?" Without invitation, Don Mathers leaned forward and dialed himself another tequila. He made it a double this time. A feeling of excitement was growing within him, and the drinks he'd had earlier had worn away. Something very big, very, very big, was developing. He hadn't the vaguest idea what.

"Lieutenant, how would you like to capture a Kraden light cruiser? If I'm not incorrect, probably Miro class."

Don laughed nervously, not knowing what the other was at but still feeling the growing excitement. He said, "In all the history of the war between our species, we've never captured a Kraden ship intact. It'd help a lot if we could."

"This one isn't exactly intact, but nearly so."

Don looked from Rostoff to Demming, and then back. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"In your sector," Rostoff said, "we ran into a derelict Miro class cruiser. The crew—repulsive creatures—were all dead. Some thirty of them. Mr. Demming and I assumed that the craft had been hit during one of the actions between our fleet and theirs and that somehow both sides had failed to recover the wreckage. At any rate, today it is floating, abandoned of all life, in your sector." Rostoff added softly, "One has to approach quite close before any signs of battle are evident. The ship looks intact."

Demming opened his eyes again and said, "And you're going to capture it."

Don Mathers bolted his tequila, licked a final drop from the edge of his lip. "And why should that rate the most difficult decoration to achieve that we've ever instituted?"

"Because," Rostoff told him, his tone grating mockery, "you're going to radio in reporting a Miro class Kraden cruiser. We assume your superiors will order you to stand off, that help is coming, that your tiny scout isn't large enough to do anything more than to keep the enemy under observation until a squadron arrives. But you will radio back that they are escaping and that you plan to attack. When your reinforcements arrive, Lieutenant, you will have conquered the Kraden, single handed, against odds of—what would you say, fifty to one?"

Don Mather's mouth was dry, his palms moist. He said, "A One Man Scout against a Miro class cruiser? At least fifty to one, Mr. Rostoff. At least."

Demming grunted. "There

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would be little doubt of you getting the Galactic Medal of Honor, Lieutenant, especially since Colin Casey is dead and there isn't a living bearer of the award. Max, another drink for the Lieutenant."

Don said, "Look. Why? I think you might be right about getting the award. But why, and why me, and what's your percentage?"

Demming muttered, "Now we get to the point." He settled back in his chair again and closed his eyes while his secretary took over.

Max Rostoff leaned forward, his wolfish face very serious. "Lieutenant, the exploitation of the Jupiter satellites is in its earliest stages. There is every reason to believe that the new sources of radioactives on Callisto alone may mean the needed power edge that can give us the victory over the Kradens. Whether or not that is so, someone is going to make literally billions out of this new frontier."

"I still don't see . . ."

"Lieutenant Mathers," Rostoff said patiently, "the bearer of the Galactic Medal of Honor is above law. He carries with him an unalienable prestige of such magnitude that . . . Well, let me use an example. Suppose a bearer of the Medal of Honor formed a stock corporation to exploit the pitchblende of Callisto. How difficult would it be for him to dispose of the stock?"

Demming grunted. "And suppose there were a few, ah, crossed wires in the manipulation of the corporation's business?" He sighed deeply. "Believe me, Lieutenant Mathers, there are an incredible number of laws which have accumulated down through the centuries to hamper the business man. It is a continual fight to be able to carry on at all. The ability to do no legal wrong would be priceless in the development of a new frontier." He sighed again, so deeply as to make his bulk quiver. "Priceless."

Rostoff laid it on the line, his face a leer. "We are offering you a three way partnership, Mathers. You, with your Medal of Honor, are our front man. Mr. Demming supplies the initial capital to get underway. And I . . ." He twisted his mouth with evil self-satisfaction. "I was present when the Kraden ship was discovered, so I'll have to be cut in. I'll supply the brains."

Demming grunted his disgust, but added nothing.

Don Mathers said slowly, looking down at the empty glass he was twirling in his fingers, "Look, we're up to our necks in a war to the death with the Kradens. In the long run it's either us or them. At a time like this

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you're suggesting that we fake an action that will eventually enable us to milk the new satellites to the tune of billions."

Demming grunted meaninglessly.

Don said, "The theory is that all men, all of us, ought to have our shoulders to the wheel. This project sounds to me like throwing rocks under it."

Demming closed his eyes.

Rostoff said, "Lieutenant, it's a dog eat dog society. If we eventually lick the Kradens, one of the very reasons will be because we're a dog eat dog society. Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Our apologists dream up some beautiful gobbledygook phrases for it, such as free enterprise, but actually it's a dog eat dog. Surprisingly enough, it works, or at least has so far. Right now, the human race needs the radioactives of the Jupiter satellites. In acquiring them, somebody is going to make a tremendous amount of money. Why shouldn't it be us?"

"Why not, if you—or we—can do it honestly?"

Demming's grunt was nearer a snort this time.

Rostoff said sourly, "Don't be naive, Lieutenant. Whoever does it, is going to need little integrity. You don't win in a sharper's card game by playing your cards honestly. The biggest sharper wins. We've just found a joker somebody dropped on the floor, if we don't use it, we're suckers."

Demming opened his pig eyes and said, "All this on the academic side. We checked your background thoroughly before approaching you, Mathers. We know your record, even before you entered the Space Service. Just between the three of us, wouldn't you like out? There are a full billion men and women in our armed forces, you can be spared. Let's say you've already done your share. Can't you see the potentialities in spending the rest of your life with the Galactic Medal of Honor in your pocket?"

It was there all right, drifting slowly. Had he done a more thorough job of his patrol, last time, he should have stumbled upon it himself.

If he had, there was no doubt that he would have at first reported it as an active enemy cruiser. Demming and Rostoff had been right. The Kraden ship looked untouched by battle.

That is, if you approached it from the starboard and slightly abaft the beam. From that angle, in particular, it looked untouched.

It had taken several circlings of the craft to come to that conclusion. Don Mathers was playing it very safe. This thing wasn't quite so simple as the

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others had thought. He wanted no slip ups. His hand went to a food compartment and emerged with a space thermo which should have contained fruit juice, but didn't. He took a long pull at it.

Finally he dropped back into the position he'd decided upon, and flicked the switch of his screen.

A base lieutenant's face illuminated it. He yawned and looked questioningly at Don Mathers.

Don said, allowing a touch of excitement in his voice, "Mathers, Scout V-102, Sector A22-K223."

"Yeah, yeah . . ." the other began, still yawning.

"I've spotted a Kraden cruiser. Miro class, I think."

The lieutenant flashed into movement. He slapped a button before him, the screen blinked, to be lit immediately again.

A gray haired Fleet Admiral looked up from papers on his desk.

"Yes?"

Don Mathers rapped, "Miro class Kraden in sector A22-K223, sir. I'm lying about fifty miles off. Undetected thus far—I think. He hasn't fired on me yet, at least."

The Admiral was already doing things with his hands. Two subalterns came within range of the screen, took orders, dashed off. The Admiral was rapidly firing orders into two other screens. After a moment, he looked up at Don Mathers again.

"Hang on, Lieutenant. Keep him under observation as long as you can. What're your exact coordinates?"

Don gave them to him and waited.

A few minutes later the Admiral returned to him. "Let's take a look at it, Lieutenant."

Don Mathers adjusted the screen to relay the Kraden cruiser. His palms were moist now, but everything was going to plan. He wished that he could take another drink.

The Admiral said, "Miro class, all right. Don't get too close, Lieutenant. They'll blast you to hell and gone. We've got a task force within an hour of you. Just hang on."

"Yes, sir," Don said. An hour. He was glad to know that. He didn't have much time in which to operate.

He let it go another five minutes, then he said, "Sir, they're increasing speed."

"Damn," the Admiral said, then rapid fired some more into his other screens, barking one order after another.

Don said, letting his voice go very flat, "I'm going in, sir. They're putting on speed. In another five minutes they'll be underway to the point where I

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won't be able to follow. They'll get completely clear."

The Admiral looked up, startled. "Don't be a fool."

"They'll get away, sir." Knowing that the other could see his every motion, Don Mathers hit the cocking lever of his flakflak gun with the heel of his right hand.

The Admiral snapped, "Let it go, you fool. You won't last a second." Then, his voice higher, "That's an order, Lieutenant!"

Don Mathers flicked off his screen. He grimaced sourly and then descended on the Kraden ship, his flakflak gun beaming it. He was going to have to expend every erg of energy in his Scout to burn the other ship up to the point where his attack would look authentic, and to eliminate all signs of previous action.

The awarding of the Galactic Medal of Honor, as always, was done in the simplest of ceremonies.

Only the President and Captain Donal Mathers himself were present in the former's office in the Presidential Palace.

However, as they both knew, every screen in the Solar System was tuned into the ceremony.

Don Mathers saluted and stood to attention.

The President read the citation. It was very short, as Medal of Honor citations were always.

. . . for conspicuous gallantry far and beyond the call of duty, in which you singlehandedly, and against unbelievable odds, attacked and destroyed an enemy cruiser while flying a Scout armed only with a short beam flakflak gun . . .

He pinned a small bit of ribbon and metal to Don Mather's tunic. It was an inconspicuous, inordinarily ordinary medal, the Galactic Medal of Honor.

Don said hoarsely, "Thank you, sir."

The President shook hands with him and said, "I am President of the United Solar System, Captain Mathers, supposedly the highest rank to which a man can attain." He added simply, "I wish I were you."

Afterwards, alone in New Washington and wanting to remain alone, Don Mathers strolled the streets for a time, bothered only occasionally when someone recognized his face and people would stop and applaud.

He grinned inwardly.

He had a suspicion already that after a time he'd get used to it and weary to death of it, but right now it was still new and fun. Who was the flyer, way back in history, the one who first flew the Atlantic in a propeller driven aircraft? His popularity must have been something like this.

He went into O'Donnell's at

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lunch time and as he entered the orchestra broke off the popular tune they were playing and struck up the Interplanetary Anthem. The manager himself escorted him to his table and made suggestions as to the specialties and the wine.

When he first sat down the other occupants of the restaurant, men and women, had stood and faced him and applauded. Don flushed. There could be too much of a good thing.

After the meal, a fantastic production, Don finished his cigar and asked the head waiter for his bill, reaching for his wallet.

The other smiled. "Captain, I am afraid your money is of no value in O'Donnell's, not for just this luncheon but whenever you honor us." The head waiter paused and added, "in fact, Captain, I doubt if there is a restaurant in the Solar System where your money holds value. Or that there will ever be."

Don Mathers was taken aback. He was only beginning to realize the ramifications of his holding his Galactic Medal of Honor.

At Space Command Headquarters, Third Division, Don came to attention before the Commodore's desk and tossed the other a salute.

The Commodore returned it snappily and leaned back in his chair. "Take a seat, Captain. Nice to see you again." He added pleasantly, "Where in the world have you been?"

Don Mathers slumped into a chair, said wearily, "On a bust. The bust to end all busts."

The Commodore chuckled. "Don't blame you," he said.

"It was quite a bust," Don said.

"Well," the Commodore chuckled again, "I don't suppose we can throw you in the guardhouse for being A.W.O.L. Not in view of your recent decoration."

There was nothing to say to that.

"By the way," the Commodore said, "I haven't had the opportunity to congratulate you on your Kraden. That was quite a feat, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," Don added, modestly, "rather foolish of me, I suppose."

"Very much so. On such foolishness are heroic deeds based, Captain." The Commodore looked at him questioningly. "You must have had incredible luck. The only way we've been able to figure it was that his detectors were on the blink. That may be what happened."

"Yes, sir," Don nodded quickly. "That's the way I figure it. And my first blast must have disrupted his fire control or something."

The Commodore said, "He

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didn't get in any return fire at all?"

"A few blasts. But by that time I was in too close and moving too fast. Fact of the matter is, sir, I don't think they ever recovered from my first beaming of them."

"No, I suppose not," the Commodore said musingly. "It's a shame you had to burn them so badly. We've never recovered a Kraden ship in good enough shape to give our techs something to work on. It might make a basic difference in the war, particularly if there was something aboard that'd give us some indication of where they were coming from. We've been fighting this war in our backyard for a full century. It would help if we could get into *their* backyard for a change. It's problematical how long we'll be able to hold them off, at this rate."

Don Mathers said uncomfortably, "Well, it's not as bad as all that, sir. We've held them this far."

His superior grunted. "We've held them this far because we've been able to keep out enough patrol ships to give us ample warning when one of their task forces come in. Do you know how much fuel that consumes, Captain?"

"Well, I know its a lot."

"So much so that Earth's industry is switching back to petroleum and coal. Every ounce of radioactives is needed by the Fleet. Even so, it's just a matter of time."

Don Mathers pursed his lips. "I didn't know it was that bad."

The Commodore smiled sourly at him. "I'm afraid I'm being a wet blanket thrown over your big bust of a celebration, Captain. Tell me, how does it feel to hold the system's highest award?"

Don shook his head, marveling. "Fantastic, sir. Of course, like any member of the services I've always known of the Medal of Honor, but . . . well, nobody ever expects to get it." He added wryly, "Certainly not while he's still alive and in health. Why, sir, do you realize that I haven't been able to spend one unit of money since?" There was an element of awe in his voice. "Sir, do you realize that not even a beggar will take currency from me?"

The Commodore nodded in appreciation. "You must understand the position you occupy, Captain. Your feat was inspiring enough, but that's not all of it. In a way you combine a popular hero with an *Unknown Soldier* element. Awarding you the Galactic Medal of Honor makes a symbol of you. A symbol representing all the millions of unsung heroes and heroines who have

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died fighting for the human species. It's not a light burden to carry on your shoulders, Captain Mathers. I would imagine it a very humbling honor."

"Well, yes, sir," Don said.

The Commodore switched his tone of voice. "That brings us to the present, and what your next assignment is to be. Obviously, it wouldn't do for you to continue in a Scout. Big brass seems to be in favor of using you for morale and . . ."

Don Mathers cleared his throat and interrupted. "Sir, I've decided to drop out of the Space Service."

"Drop out!" The other stared at Mathers, uncomprehending. "We're at war, Captain!"

Don nodded seriously. "Yes, sir. And what you just said is true. I couldn't be used any longer in a Scout. I'd wind up selling bonds and giving talks to old ladies' clubs."

"Well, hardly that, Captain."

"No, sir, I think I'd really be of more use out of the services. I'm tendering my resignation and making arrangements to help in the developing of Callisto and the other Jupiter satellites."

The Commodore said nothing. His lips seemed whiter than before.

Don Mathers said doggedly, "Perhaps my prestige will help bring volunteers to work the new mines out there. If they see me, well, sacrificing, putting up with the hardships . . ."

The Commodore said evenly, "Mr. Mathers, I doubt if you will ever have to put up with hardships again, no matter where you make your abode. However, good luck. You deserve it."

Outside headquarters, Don Mathers summoned a cab and dialed his hotel. On the way over, he congratulated himself. It had gone easier than he had expected, really. Although, come to think of it, there wasn't a damn thing that the brass could do.

He had to laugh to himself.

Imagine if he'd walked in on the Commodore a month ago and announced that he was going to *drop out* of the Space Service. He would have been dropped all right, all right. Right into the lap of a squadron of psycho experts.

At the hotel he shucked his uniform, an action which gave him considerable gratification, and dressed in one of the score of civilian costumes that filled his closets to overflowing. He took pleasure in estimating what this clothing would have cost in terms of months of Space Service pay for a Sub-lieutenant or even a Captain. *Years, my boy, years.*

He looked at himself in the

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dressing room mirror with satisfaction, then turned to the autobar and dialed himself a stone age old Metaxa. He'd lost his taste for the plebian tequila in the last few days.

He held the old Greek brandy to the light and wondered pleasurably what the stuff cost, per pony glass. Happily, he'd never have to find out.

He tossed the drink down and whistling, took his private elevator to the garages in the second level of the hotel's basement floors. He selected a limousine and dialed the Interplanetary Lines building.

He left the car at the curb before the main entrance, ignoring all traffic regulations and entered the building, still whistling softly and happily to himself. He grinned when a small crowd gathered outside and smiled and clapped their hands. He grinned and waved to them.

A receptionist hurried to him and he told her he wanted to see either Mr. Demming or Mr. Rostoff and then when she offered to escort him personally he noticed her pixie-like cuteness and said, "What're you doing tonight, Miss?"

Her face went pale. "Oh, anything, sir," she said weakly.

He grinned at her. "Maybe I'll take you up on that if I'm not too busy."

He had never seen anyone so taken aback. She said, all flustered, "I'm Toni. Toni Fitzgerald. You can just call this building and ask for me. Any time."

"Maybe I'll do that," he smiled. "But now, let's see Old Man Demming."

That took her back too. Aside from being asked for a date—if asked could be the term—by the system's greatest celebrity, she was hearing for the first time the interplanetary tycoon being called *Old Man Demming*.

She said, "Oh, right this way, Captain Mathers."

Don said, "Mr. Mathers now, I'm afraid. I have new duties."

She looked up into his face. "You'll always be Captain Mathers to me, sir." She added, softly and irrelevantly, "My two brothers were lost on the *Minerva* in that action last year off Pluto." She took a deep breath, which only stressed her figure. "I've applied six times for Space Service, but they won't take me."

They were in an elevator now. Don said, "That's too bad, Toni. However, the Space Service isn't as romantic as you might think."

"Yes, sir," Toni Fitzgerald said, her soul in her eyes. "You ought to know, sir."

Don was somehow irritated. He said nothing further until they reached the upper stories of the gigantic office building.

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He thanked her after she'd turned him over to another receptionist.

Don Mathers' spirits had been restored by the time he was brought to the door of Max Rostoff's office. His new guide evidently hadn't even bothered to check on the man's availability, before ushering Mathers into the other's presence.

Max Rostoff looked up from his desk, wolfishly aggressive looking as ever. "Why, Captain," he said. "How fine to see you again. Come right in. Martha, that will be all."

Martha gave the interplanetary hero one more long look and then turned and left.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Max Rostoff turned and snarled, "Where have you been, you rummy?"

He couldn't have shocked Don Mathers more if he'd suddenly sprouted a unicorn's horn.

"We've been looking for you for a week," Rostoff snapped. "Out of one bar, into another, our men couldn't catch up with you. Dammit, don't you realize we've got to get going? We've got a dozen documents for you to sign. We've got to get this thing underway, before somebody else does."

Don blurted, "You can't talk to me that way."

It was the other's turn to stare. Max Rostoff said, low and dangerously, "No? Why can't I?"

Don glared at him.

Max Rostoff said, low and dangerously, "Let's get this straight, Mathers. To everybody else, but Demming and me, you might be the biggest hero in the Solar System. But you know what you are to us?"

Don felt his indignation seeping from him.

"To us," Max Rostoff said flatly, "you're just another demi-buttocked incompetent on the make." He added definitely, "And make no mistake, Mathers, you'll continue to have a good thing out of this only so long as we can use you."

A voice from behind them said, "Let me add to that, period, end of paragraph."

It was Lawrence Demming, who'd just entered from an inner office.

He said, even his voice seemed fat, "And now that's settled, I'm going to call in some lawyers. While they're around, we conduct ourselves as though we're three equal partners. On paper, we will be."

"Wait a minute, now," Don blurted. "What do you think you're pulling? The agreement was we split this whole thing three ways."

Demming's jowls wobbled as he nodded. "That's right. And your share of the loot is your

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Galactic Medal of Honor. That and the dubious privilege of having the whole thing in your name. You'll keep your medal, and we'll keep our share." He growled heavily, "You don't think you're getting the short end of the stick, do you?"

Max Rostoff said, "Let's knock this off and get the law boys in. We've got enough paper work to keep us busy the rest of the week." He sat down again at his desk and looked up at Don. "Then we'll all be taking off for Callisto, to get things under way. With any luck, in six months we'll have every ounce of pitchblende left in the system sewed up."

There was a crowd awaiting his ship at the Callisto Spaceport. A crowd modest by Earth standards but representing a large percentage of the small population of Jupiter's moon.

On the way out, a staff of the system's best speech writers, and two top professional actors had been working with him.

Don Mathers gave a short preliminary talk at the spaceport, and then the important one, the one that was broadcast throughout the system, that night from his suite at the hotel. He'd been well rehearsed, and they'd kept him from the bottle except for two or three quick ones immediately before going on.

The project at hand is to extract the newly discovered deposits of pitchblende on these satellites of Jupiter.

He paused impressively before continuing.

It's a job that cannot be done in slipshod, haphazard manner. The system's need for radioactives cannot be overstressed.

In short, fellow humans, we must allow nothing to stand in the way of all out, unified effort to do this job quickly and efficiently. My associates and I have formed a corporation to manage this crash program. We invite all to participate by purchasing stock. I will not speak of profits, fellow humans, because in this emergency we all scorn them. However, as I say, you are invited to participate.

Some of the preliminary mining concessions are at present in the hands of individuals or small corporations. It will be necessary that these turn over their holdings to our single all-embracing organization for the sake of efficiency. Our experts will evaluate such holdings and recompense the owners.

Don Mathers paused again for emphasis.

This is no time for quibbling. All must come in. If there are those who put private gain before the needs of the system, then pressures must be found to be exerted against them.

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We will need thousands and tens of thousands of trained workers to operate our mines, our mills, our refineries. In the past, skilled labor here on the satellites was used to double or even triple the wage rates on Earth and the settled planets and satellites. I need only repeat, this is no time for personal gain and quibbling. The corporation announces proudly that it will pay only prevailing Earth rates. We will not insult our employees by "bribing" them to patriotism through higher wages.

There was more, along the same lines.

It was all taken very well. Indeed, with enthusiasm.

On the third day, at an office conference, Don waited for an opening to say, "Look, somewhere here on Callisto is a young woman named Dian Fuller. After we get me established in an office, I'd like her to be my secretary."

Demming looked up from some reports he was scanning. He grunted to Max Rostoff, "Tell him," and went back to the papers.

Max Rostoff, settled back into his chair. He said to the two bodyguards, stationed at the door, "Scotty, Rogers, go and make the arrangements to bring that damned prospector into line."

When they were gone, Rostoff turned back to Don Mathers. "You don't need an office, Mathers. All you need is to go back to your bottles. Just don't belt it so hard that you can't sign papers every time we need a signature."

Don flushed angrily, "Look, don't push me, you two. You need me. Plenty. In fact, from what I can see, this corporation needs me more than it does you." He looked scornfully at Demming. "Originally, the idea was that you put up the money. What money? We have fifty-one percent of the stock in my name, but all the credit units needed are coming from sales of stock." He turned to Rostoff. "You were supposed to put up the brains. What brains? We've hired the best mining engineers, the best technicians, to do their end, the best corporation executives to handle that end. You're not needed."

Demming grunted amusement at the short speech, but didn't bother to look up from his perusal.

Max Rostoff's face had grown wolfishly thin in his anger. "Look, bottle-baby," he sneered, "you're the only one that's vulnerable in this set-up. There's not a single thing that Demming and I can be held to account for. You have no beefs coming, for that matter. You're getting

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everything you ever wanted. You've got the best suite in the best hotel on Callisto. You eat the best food the Solar System provides. And, most important of all to a rummy, you drink the best booze and as much of it as you want. What's more, unless either Demming or I go to the bother, you'll never be exposed. You'll live your life out being the biggest hero in the system."

It was Don Mathers' turn to sneer. "What do you mean, I'm the only one vulnerable? There's no evidence against me, Rostoff, and you know it. Who'd listen to you if you sounded off? I burned that Kraden cruiser until there wasn't a sign to be found that would indicate it wasn't in operational condition when I first spotted it."

Demming grunted his amusement again.

Max Rostoff laughed sourly. "Don't be an ass, Mathers. We took a series of photos of that derelict when we stumbled on it. Not only can we prove you didn't knock it out, we can prove that it was in good shape before you worked it over. I imagine the Fleet technician would have loved to have seen the inner workings of that Kraden cruiser —before you loused it up."

Demming chuckled flatly. "I wonder what kind of a court martial they give a hero who turns out to be a saboteur."

He ran into her, finally, after he'd been on Callisto for nearly eight months. Actually, he didn't remember the circumstances of their meeting. He was in an alcoholic daze and the fog rolled out, and there she was across the table from him.

Don shook his head, and looked about the room. They were in some sort of night spot. He didn't recognize it.

He licked his lips, scowled at the taste of stale vomit.

He slurred, "Hello, Di."

Dian Fuller said, "Hi, Don."

He said, "I must've blanked out. Guess I've been hitting it too hard."

She laughed at him. "You mean you don't remember all the things you've been telling me the past two hours?" She was obviously quite sober. Dian never had been much for the sauce.

Don looked at her narrowly. "What've I been telling you for the past two hours?"

"Mostly about how it was when you were a little boy. About fishing, and your first .22 rifle. And the time you shot the squirrel, and then felt so sorry."

"Oh," Don said. He ran his right hand over his mouth.

There was a champagne bucket beside him, but the bottle in it was empty. He looked about the room for a waiter.

Dian said gently, "Do you

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really think you need any more, Don?"

He looked across the table at her. She was as beautiful as ever. No, that wasn't right. She was pretty, but not beautiful. She was just a damn pretty girl, not one of these glamour items.

Don said, "Look, I can't remember. Did we get married?"

Her laugh tinkled. "Married! I only ran into you two or three hours ago." She hesitated before saying further, "I had assumed that you were deliberately avoiding me. Callisto isn't that big."

Don Mathers said slowly, "Well, if we're not married, let me decide when I want another bottle of the grape, eh?"

Dian flushed. "Sorry, Don."

The headwaiter approached bearing another magnum of vintage wine. He beamed at Don Mathers. "Having a good time, sir?"

"Okay," Don said shortly. When the other was gone he downed a full glass, felt the fumes almost immediately.

He said to Dian, "I haven't been avoiding you, Di. We just haven't met. The way I remember, the last time we saw each other, back on Earth, you gave me quite a slap in the face. The way I remember, you didn't think I was hero enough for you." He poured another glass of the champagne.

Di's face was still flushed. She said, her voice low, "I misunderstood you, Don. Even after your brilliant defeat of that Kraden cruiser, I still, I admit, think I basically misunderstood you. I told myself that it could have been done by any pilot of a Scout, given that one in a million break. It just happened to be you, who made that suicide dive attack that succeeded. A thousand other pilots might also have taken the million to one suicide chance rather than let the Kraden escape."

"Yeah," Don said. Even in his alcohol, he was surprised at her words. He said gruffly, "Sure anybody might've done it. Pure luck. But why'd you change your mind about me, then? How come the switch of heart?"

"Because of what you've done since, darling."

He closed one eye, the better to focus.

"Since?"

He recognized the expression in her eyes. A touch of star gleam. That little girl back on Earth, the receptionist at the Interplanetary Lines building, she'd had it. In fact, in the past few months Don had seen it in many feminine faces. And all for him.

Dian said, "Instead of cashing in on your prestige, you've been devoting yourself to something even more necessary to the fight

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than bringing down individual Kraden cruisers."

Don looked at her. He could feel a nervous tic beginning in his left eyebrow. Finally, he reached for the champagne again and filled his glass. He said, "You really go for this hero stuff, don't you?"

She said nothing, but the star shine was still in her eyes.

He made his voice deliberately sour. "Look, suppose I asked you to come back to my apartment with me tonight?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"And told you to bring your overnight bag along," he added brutally.

Dian looked into his face. "Why are you twisting yourself, your inner-self, so hard, Don? Of course I'd come—if that's what you wanted."

"And then," he said flatly, "suppose I kicked you out in the morning?"

Dian winced, but she kept her eyes even with his, her own moist now. "You forget," she whispered. "You have been awarded the Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong."

"Oh, God," Don muttered. He filled his glass, still again, motioned to a nearby waiter.

"Yes, sir," the waiter said.

Don said, "Look, in about five minutes I'm going to pass out. See that I get back to my hotel, will you? And that this young lady gets to her home. And, waiter, just send my bill to the hotel too."

The other bowed. "The owner's instructions, sir, are that Captain Mathers must never see a bill in this establishment."

Dian said, *"Don!"*

He didn't look at her. He raised his glass to his mouth and shortly afterward the fog rolled in again.

When it rolled out, the unfamiliar taste of black coffee was in his mouth. He shook his head for clarity.

He seemed to be in some working class restaurant. Next to him, in a booth, was a fresh faced Sub-lieutenant of the— Don squinted at the collar tabs —yes, of the Space Service. A Scout pilot.

Don stuttered, "What's . . . goin' . . . on?"

The pilot said apologetically, "Sub-lieutenant Pierpont, sir. You seemed so far under the weather, I took over."

"Oh, you did, eh?"

"Well, yes, sir. You were, well, reclining in the gutter, sir. In spite of your, well, appearance, your condition, I recognized you, sir."

"Oh." His stomach was an objecting turmoil.

The Lieutenant said, "Want to try some more of this coffee now,

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sir? Or maybe some soup or a sandwich?"

Don groaned. "No. No, thanks. Don't think I could hold it down."

The pilot grinned. "You must've thrown a classic, sir."

"I guess so. What time is it? No, that doesn't make any difference. What's the date?"

Pierpont told him.

It was hard to believe. The last he could remember he'd been with Di. With Di in some nightclub. He wondered how long ago that had been.

He fumbled in his clothes for a smoke and couldn't find one. He didn't want it anyway.

He growled at the Lieutenant, "Well, how go the One Man Scouts?"

Pierpont grinned back at him. "Glad to be out of them, sir?"

"Usually."

Pierpont looked at him strangely. "I don't blame you, I suppose. But it isn't as bad these days as it used to be while you were still in the Space Service, sir."

Don grunted. "How come? Two weeks to a month, all by yourself, watching the symptoms of space cafard progress. Then three weeks of leave, to get drunk in, and then another stretch in space."

The pilot snorted deprecation. "That's the way it used to be." He fingered the spoon of his coffee cup. "That's the way it still should be, of course. But it isn't. They're spreading the duty around now and I spend less than one week out of four on patrol."

Don hadn't been listening too closely, but now he looked up. "What'd'ya mean?"

Pierpont said, "I mean, sir, I suppose this isn't bridging security, seeing who you are, but fuel stocks are so low that we can't maintain full patrols any more."

There was a cold emptiness in Don Mather's stomach.

He said, "Look, I'm still woozy. Say that again, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant told him again.

Don Mathers rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth and tried to think.

He said finally, "Look, Lieutenant. First let's get another cup of coffee into me, and maybe that sandwich you were talking about. Then would you help me to get back to my hotel?"

By the fourth day, his hands weren't trembling any longer. He ate a good breakfast, dressed carefully, then took a hotel limousine down to the offices of the Mathers, Demming and Rostoff Corporation.

At the entrance to the inner sanctum the heavyset Scotty looked up at his approach. He said, "The boss has been looking

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for you, Mr. Mathers, but right now you ain't got no appointment, have you? Him and Mr. Rostoff is having a big conference. He says to keep everybody out."

"That doesn't apply to me, Scotty," Don snapped. "Get out of my way."

Scotty stood up, reluctantly, but barred the way. "He said it applied to everybody, Mr. Mathers."

Don put his full weight into a blow that started at his waist, dug deep into the other's middle. Scotty doubled forward, his eyes bugging. Don Mathers gripped his hands together into a double fist and brought them upward in a vicious uppercut.

Scotty fell forward and to the floor.

Don stood above him momentarily, watchful for movement which didn't develop. The hefty bodyguard must have been doing some easy living himself. He wasn't as tough as he looked.

Don knelt and fished from under the other's left arm a vicious looking short barrelled scrambler. He tucked it under his own jacket into his belt, then turned, opened the door and entered the supposedly barred office.

Demming and Rostoff looked up from their work across a double desk.

Both scowled. Rostoff opened his mouth to say something and Don Mathers rapped, "Shut up."

Rostoff blinked at him. Demming leaned back in his swivel chair. "You're sober for a change," he wheezed, almost accusingly.

Don Mathers pulled up a stenographer's chair and straddled it, leaning his arms on the back. He said coldly, "Comes a point when even the lowest worm turns. I've been checking on a few things."

Demming grunted amusement.

Don said, "Space patrols have been cut far below the danger point."

Rostoff snorted. "Is that supposed to interest us? That's the problem of the military—and the government."

"Oh, it interests us, all right," Don growled. "Currently, Mathers, Demming and Rostoff control probably three-quarters of the system's radioactives."

Demming said in greasy satisfaction, "More like four-fifths."

"Why?" Don said bluntly. "Why are we doing what we're doing?"

They both scowled, but another element was present in their expressions too. They thought the question unintelligent.

Demming closed his eyes in his porcine manner and grunted, "Tell him."

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Rostoff said, "Look, Mathers, don't be stupid. Remember when we told you, during that first interview, that we wanted your name in the corporation, among other reasons, because we could use a man who was above law? That a maze of ridiculously binding ordinances have been laid on business down through the centuries?"

"I remember," Don said bitterly.

"Well, it goes both ways. Government today is also bound, very strongly, and even in great emergency, not to interfere in business. These complicated laws balance each other, you might say. Our whole legal system is based upon them. Right now, we've got government right where we want it. This is free enterprise, Mathers, at its pinnacle. Did you ever hear of Jim Fisk and his attempt to corner gold in 1869, the co-called Black Friday affair? Well, Jim Fisk was a peanut peddlar compared to us."

"What's this got to do with the Fleet having insufficient fuel to . . ." Don Mathers stopped as comprehension hit him. "You're holding our radioactives off the market, pressuring the government for a price rise which it can't afford."

Demming opened his eyes and said fatly, "For triple the price, Mathers. Before we're through, we'll corner half the wealth of the system."

Don said, "But . . . but the species is . . . at . . . *war*."

Rostoff sneered, "You seem to be getting noble rather late in the game, Mathers. Business is business."

Don Mathers was shaking his head. "We immediately begin selling our radioactives at cost of production. I might remind you gentlemen that although we're supposedly a three way partnership, actually, everything's in my name. You thought you had me under your thumb so securely that it was safe—and you probably didn't trust each other. Well, I'm blowing the whistle."

Surprisingly fast for such a fat man, Lawrence Demming's hand flitted into a desk drawer to emerge with a twin of the scrambler tucked in Don's belt.

Don Mathers grinned at him, even as he pushed his jacket back to reveal the butt of his own weapon. He made no attempt to draw it, however.

He said softly, "Shoot me, Demming, and you've killed the most popular man in the Solar System. You'd never escape the gas chamber, no matter how much money you have. On the other hand, if I shoot you . . ."

He put a hand into his pocket and it emerged with a small, in-

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ordinately ordinary bit of ribbon and metal. He displayed it on his palm.

The fat man's face whitened at the ramifications and his hand relaxed to let the gun drop to the desk. "Listen, Don," he broke out. "We've been unrealistic with you. We'll reverse ourselves and split, honestly—split three ways."

Don Mathers laughed at him. "Trying to bribe me with money, Demming? Why don't you realize, that I'm the only man in existence who has no need for money, who can't spend money? That my fellow men—whom I've done such a good job of betraying—have honored me to a point where money is meaningless?"

Rostoff snatched up the fallen gun, snarling, "I'm calling your bluff, you gutless rummy."

Don Mathers said, "Okay, Rostoff. There's just two other things I want to say first. One—I don't care if I die or not. Two—you're only twenty feet or so away, but you know what? I think you're probably a lousy shot. I don't think you've had much practice. I think I can get my scrambler out and cut you down before you can finish me." He grinned thinly, "Wanta try?"

Max Rostoff snarled a curse and his finger whitened on the trigger.

Don Mathers fell sideward, his hand streaking for his weapon. Without thought there came back to him the long hours of training in hand weapons, in judo, in hand to hand combat. He went into action with cool confidence.

At the spaceport he took a cab to the Presidential Palace. It was an auto-cab, of course, and at the Palace gates he found he had no money on him. He snorted wearily. It was the first time in almost a year that he'd had to pay for anything.

Four sentries were standing at attention. He said, "Do one of you boys have some coins to feed into this slot? I'm fresh out."

A sergeant grinned, approached, and did the necessary.

Don Mathers said wearily, "I don't know how you go about this. I don't have an appointment, but I want to see the President."

"We can turn you over to one of the assistant secretaries, Captain Mathers," the sergeant said. "We can't go any further than that. While we're waiting, what's the chances of getting your autograph, sir? I gotta kid . . ."

It wasn't nearly as complicated as he'd thought it was going to be. In half an hour he was seated in the office where he'd received his decoration only—how long ago was it, really less than a year?

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He told the story briefly, making no effort to spare himself. At the end he stood up long enough to put a paper in front of the other, then sat down again.

"I'm turning the whole corporation over to the government . . ."

The President said, "Wait a minute. My administration does not advocate State ownership of industry."

"I know. When the State controls industry you only put the whole mess off one step, the question then becomes, who controls the State? However, I'm not arguing political economy with you, sir. You didn't let me finish. I was going to say, I'm turning it over to the government to untangle, even while making use of the inventories of radioactives. There's going to be a lot of untangling to do. Reimbursing the prospectors and small operators who were blackjacked out of their holdings by our super-corporation. Reimbursing of the miners and other laborers who were talked into accepting low pay in the name of patriotism." Don Mathers cut it short. "Oh, it's quite a mess."

"Yes," the President said. "And you say Max Rostoff is dead?"

"That's right. And Demming off his rocker. I think he always was a little unbalanced and the prospect of losing all that money, the greatest fortune ever conceived of, tipped the scales."

The President said, "And what about you, Donal Mathers?"

Don took a deep breath. "I wish I was back in the Space Services, frankly. Back where I was when all this started. However, I suppose that after my court martial, there won't be . . ."

The President interrupted gently. "You seem to forget, Captain Mathers. You carry the Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong."

Don Mathers gaped at him.

The President smiled at him, albeit a bit sourly. "It would hardly do for human morale to find out our supreme symbol of heroism was a phoney, Captain. There will be no trial, and you will retain your decoration."

"But I don't want it!"

"I'm afraid that is the cross you'll have to bear the rest of your life, Captain Mathers. I don't suppose it will be an easy one."

His eyes went to a far corner of the room, but unseeingly. He said after a long moment, "However, I am not so very sure about your not deserving your award, Captain."

THE END

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Tillot tangled with time once . . . twice . . . once too often . . . and then he found he couldn't break

THE HABIT

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

OUTWARDLY she was just another ship, just another of the standard freighters that handled most of the traffic from Earth to her planetary colonies. She had been, in fact, such a freighter—the name *Venus Girl* still shone, in letters of gold, on her sleek side. Only the experienced eye of the professional spaceman would have noted the oddly shaped slits, black against gleaming metal, in her shell plating. Only the professional spaceman, together with a handful of physicists, would have been able to hazard an intelligent guess as to their purport.

Two men appeared, framed in the circle of the airlock door. The first of them ignored the ramp, jumped the ten feet between airlock and apron, landing lightly, his knees flexing to take the shock of his fall. The second followed more sedately, walking slowly down the inclined way to the scarred concrete. He said, his voice reproving, "You should be more careful, Tillot. After all, we blast off tonight."

"If I were being careful," replied the spaceman, the stance of his short, slight figure somehow belligerent, "I shouldn't be here."

The tall man—his name was Abbotsford and he was head of the Interplanetary Transport Commission's Department of Research—bit back an angry reproof. He said, "I'm glad to have you with me, Tillot. I'm glad that out of all the rocket pilots employed by the Commission there was one volunteer. Even so, I wish you'd be careful. There's too much hinging upon the success of this test flight . . ."

"All right, Doctor," replied Tillot in tones of mock humility. "I'll be careful. I'll take this

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crate of yours up out of the atmosphere as though she were a basket of eggs, and I'll bring her back the same way. What happens in between times is up to you." There was mockery in his voice. "In between times—I suppose that you'll be careful."

"Of course," said Abbotsford stiffly.

"Of course," mimicked Tillot. Then—"Don't make me laugh, Doctor. This will be the first ship to approach the speed of light, the first interstellar ship . . . How the hell can you be careful? "

Their conversation was interrupted then; there were officials of the Commission desiring speech with them, Abbotsford's colleagues and members of the executive staff of the spaceport. The group of men and woman walked slowly across the broad stretch of concrete to the complex of offices, storerooms and repair shops, to the oasis of artifact and ingenuity set in the featureless desert.

Later that night Abbotsford got Tillot to himself, pleading that he and his pilot had much to discuss concerning the experimental flight. They sat in Abbotsford's room—bare it was, sparsely yet comfortably furnished, more office or laboratory than living apartment—sipping the whiskey that the scientist had produced from a filing cabinet.

Abbotsford said, "I'm curious . . ."

"Isn't that the proper occupational state of mind for a research scientist?" asked Tillot.

"Why, yes. But what I'm curious about is a question of psychology rather than physics."

"Then why don't you go to Dr. Wendell? After all, he is the Commission's number one trick cyclist."

"Dr. Wendell," said Abbotsford, who was not quite sober, "would have talked a lot of crap about the Oedipus Complex, the Death Wish and all the rest of it. He would have told me nothing."

"I'm just a rocketeer," said Tillot.

"But it's you that I'm curious about."

"Isn't this inquisition rather . . . presumptuous, Doctor?"

"No. I don't think so. After all, we shall be cooped up together in that tin coffin out there for quite a long time. We should know something about each other."

"Then what do you want to know?" demanded Tillot.

"Just this. Spacemen are supposed to be an adventurous breed. There are two hundred odd pilots in the employ of the Interplanetary Transport Commission. And yet, for what could well be the first interstellar

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flight, there's only one volunteer. You."

Tillot laughed, with a touch of bitterness. "It had to be me. If I hadn't volunteered, I'd have been told to. It's as simple as that."

"But *why?*"

The spaceman laughed again. "I'll tell you. It had always been the Commission's policy to employ only married men in Space. The married man is not lacking in courage, or the adventurous spirit. But he takes no unjustifiable risks, either with ships or lives . . ."

"I think I begin to see . . . And you?"

"You'd not have gotten me as a volunteer—or a conscript—this time last year," said Tillot flatly.

"Even so, the risk is neither great nor unjustifiable. Neutralized gravity and the repulsive force of light are a motive power far less hazardous than your rocket motors. The most dangerous parts of the flight will still be blasting off and landing, under rocket power . . ."

"Agreed. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Now I'm going to ask *you* a personal question, Dr. Abbotsford," said Tillot. "Have you ever been in love? Come to that—have you ever had a woman?"

"Women have never bothered me much. I've had my work, and . . ."

"All right. I'll explain. The rocket pilot blasts off on a voyage—to the Moon, Mars, Venus, the Belt, or wherever. If things go badly wrong he won't come back. If things don't go wrong—and it's up to him to make sure of that—he does come back, after a lapse of, at the outside, months. Now, I'm no physicist. As far as I'm concerned, astronautics is just a matter of ballistics; a spaceship is no more than a manned missile over the trajectory of which the crew are able to exert a limited degree of control. But interstellar flight, with speed approaching that of light itself, is different. As I understand it, Time, for the crew of such a ship, will be different from the Time kept by the world that they have left. A voyage may last for a matter of mere months—but on return it will be found that Earth has circled the Sun fifty times, or more . . ."

"Crudely put," said Abbotsford, "but near enough to the truth."

"Then ask yourself," Tillot told him, "what married man would ship out with such a homecoming to look forward to?"

She stood proudly on the scarred concrete, gleaming in the reflected light of the bright floods. High in the sky rode Cross and Centaur—and it seem-

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ed wrong that her sharp prow was not pointed directly towards Alpha Centauri, the obvious first objective for the first interstellar ship. Even Tillot, walking out to the vessel, felt this, although he was aware of the absurdity of his feelings. As well expect the prow of the Lunar Ferry, on blast-off, to be pointed directly at the Moon, the sharp stem of a liner of the Martian Mail to be lined up exactly on the glowing spark in the sky that was the red planet. Time enough to get the ship on to her trajectory—but was "trajectory" the right word to use regarding the course of a sailing ship of Space?—after she was up and clear, in orbit around the Earth.

Abruptly he turned, shaking hands with those who had walked out to the ship with him. They wished him luck. Some of them, a little wistfully, wondered what sort of world he would find on his return. He allowed himself to speculate, briefly, on the same subject, thinking, *Perhaps even now there is somebody, some schoolgirl, who will grow up to be almost the twin of Valerie. Perhaps I will find her. Perhaps she will be waiting for me . . .*

He climbed the ramp to the airlock, went inside the little compartment, pressing the button that retracted the tongue of metal that was the ramp, the other button that shut and sealed the circular outer door. Abbotsford, he knew, was waiting for him in the control room. Abbotsford might guess the meaning of the lights flashing on the console, although it didn't much matter if he did not. Abbotsford, for all his knowledge, for all his high standing with the Commission, was so very much a planetlubber.

Tillot could have used the elevator in the axial shaft to take him up to Control but he preferred not to. He didn't know for how long he would be living under conditions of Free Fall; this might well be the last chance for him properly to exercise his muscles for months. He clambered from compartment to compartment, up a succession of ladders—past the heavily shielded, almost featureless monster that was the Pile, past the propellant tanks, through the "farm" in which were the hydroponics tanks, the algae and yeast and tissue culture vats, through the compartments that had once been cargo and passenger spaces and that now housed Abbotsford's machines. Tillot wished that he knew more about them. The motors that extruded and retracted the big, plastic sails were obvious enough but the generators, Abbotsford's

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own invention, that somehow nullified gravitational fields were a mystery to him, a complexity of spinning wheels set at odd angles to each other, gyroscopes mounted within gyroscopes, a huge, gleaming pendulum that looked ornamental but that must be functional.

At last, he climbed up through the little hatch into the control room. As he had surmised, Abbotsford was already there, strapped into his own seat, the seat before which was mounted his own control console.

"Are you ready, Tillot?" he asked testily.

"Ready," replied the spaceman shortly. He strapped himself into his chair, spoke briefly into the microphone. "*Venus Girl* to Spaceport Control. Request permission to proceed."

"Experimental Station Spaceport Control to *Venus Girl*. Proceed at will—and good luck."

"Thank you, Spaceport Control. Proceeding."

The great flower of flame blossomed beneath *Venus Girl's* vaned stern and she lifted, balancing delicately upon the lengthening column of incandescent gases, borne skyward on the screaming thunder of her rockets. Tillot, trusting the servo-mechanisms, looked out of the big viewports to the dwindling Earth below—the seas and continents, the drifting cloud masses, the sparkling lights of the great cities—and wondered when, if ever, he would ever see the mother planet again.

He told himself that he didn't much care, and knew that he was lying.

Abbotsford said, after the initial confusion was over, that he looked upon the accident as a blessing rather than a catastrophe, that it would take its place among the other accidents that have led to great scientific discoveries.

"Think of it!" he enthused.

"I am thinking of it," grumbled Tillot. "Your comic Drive has gone wrong. We don't know where we are, where we're heading. What's so wonderful about that?"

"My Drive hasn't gone wrong," said the scientist patiently. "It's gone *right*."

"Are you sure that bang on the head didn't upset you, Doctor?"

"Quite sure. Look at it this way, Tillot. For years I was working on the problem of antigravity. I succeeded in nullifying gravity, but no more. That was why I had to cook up that absurd makeshift of spars and sails—a makeshift that now will never be used. But the sheer, blind chance of it! A loose connection, shaken adrift by your rockets. A spindle forced out of

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its bearing by the acceleration . . . It's fantastic!"

"I'll say," agreed the spaceman dourly.

"You aren't very enthusiastic."

"Frankly, I'm not. Perhaps I'm old fashioned, but as far as I'm concerned the prime function of a ship is to carry a payload from Point A to Point B, and return to Point A . . ."

"I thought that you weren't fussy about that part of it."

"I thought so, too. But there comes a time when you begin to think of all the liquor you haven't drunk, all the girls you haven't made love to . . ."

"The liquor part of it begins to worry me a little," admitted the scientist. "I suppose I'm a fair enough organic chemist to concoct something from the vegetables in the tanks and the yeast from the vats, should the need arise. Even so . . ."

"Well?" demanded Tillot. "What do we do?"

"I'll stop the gravity nullifiers," said Abbotsford. "Then it's up to you to get some kind of fix. You're the navigator."

"Strictly interplanetary," the spaceman told him. "Not interstellar. But I'll do my best . . ."

Tillot strapped himself into his chair, watched Abbotsford pull himself through the hatch, vanish into the body of the ship. When he was alone he switched his attention to the weird grayness outside the viewports, the flickering nothingness. There was no sensation of speed. The ship was falling free—and yet, with her repulsive field in operation, she must be accelerating. Tillot decided that there must, somehow, be no longer inertia. If there had been inertia he would have been spread over the control room deck like strawberry jam.

The intercom phone buzzed and Abbotsford's voice remarked, conversationally, "Stand by, Tillot. I'm shutting down."

"All right. Shut down."

The subdued whirring of machinery faltered, abruptly ceased. With startling, shocking suddenness Space, as seen through the viewports, became its familiar, velvety black, the bright beacons of the stars springing into view. But it was not the sight of the stars that caused the scream that burst from Tillot's throat. It was the sight of the planet, the huge, gleaming globe, that was directly ahead of *Venus Girl*, that was expanding with terrifying rapidity with every passing second.

"Abbotsford!" he shouted. "Start up your motors! Planet dead ahead!"

He heard the scientist curse, heard him mutter, "*Damn* the fool thing!"

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"What's wrong?"

"Everything! The whole lot's just fallen to pieces!"

"Then hang on!" shouted Tillot. "I'll have to use the rockets. I'll try to throw us into some kind of orbit!"

He actuated the big gyroscope, was relieved when he heard the familiar humming of the thing, when he saw the stars swinging across the viewports, the stars and that swollen, still swelling globe. He saw the strange planet disappear, saw its image appear again in the periscope screen. He stopped the gyroscope, used his rockets, watched the quivering needle of the accelerometer. One gravity . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . . His body was pressed deep into the padding of his chair. He wondered how Abbotsford was making out, sprawled on the hard deck of his engine-room. But this way there was a chance of survival for both of them; with too gentle a deceleration there would be no chance for either of them.

He hit the fringes of the atmosphere, his rocket drive still bellowing. He swept around the night side of the planet like a meteor, hull heated to incandescence, then put into Space again. Again he made the grazing ellipse, and again—and looked with growing horror at the gauges of the propellant tanks. There must be a leak, he thought, a fractured line. It was obvious that there would not be enough reaction mass to establish the ship in any sort of orbit. There might be enough for a landing, although that was doubtful.

But it had to be tried.

"Abbotsford!" he cried. "We are going down!"

He thought he heard an answering moan, but he could not be sure.

Once again the ship swept around the sunlit side of the planet, this time inside the atmosphere. And this time Tillot snatched hasty glances from his controls, caught brief glimpses of the world that he was circling. "No," he muttered. "No . . ." But it had to be. Nowhere in the Universe could the outlines of seas and continents be duplicated so exactly. Nowhere in the Universe could there be another world whose satellite was so large as to be almost a sister planet.

And then there was no time for observations. Then there was a seeming eternity of fighting a pitching, yawing ship that was writing crazy words in fire across the night sky. Then there was the last, hopeless gasp of the rockets, their propellant tanks run dry. Then there was the flash of inspiration that came to Tillot, and the running out of the great sails that should have

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caught and held the almost immaterial photons, that were far too flimsy to withstand the assault of the uprushing molecules of atmosphere. But hold they did, although not for long. Hold they did, and in the seconds before they were ripped to streaming shreds they slowed *Venus Girl* appreciably, slowed her so that she hit the sea almost gently.

Almost.

The force of the impact buckled her plating, broke everything with one exception, that was breakable—that one exception being the bones of her pilot. Tillot survived the crash, even retained consciousness. Shakily, he unstrapped himself and, staggering as the wreck lurched in the swell, made his way to the hatch, clambered down ladder after ladder to Abbotsford's engineroom. He found the scientist sprawled brokenly among the wreckage of his machine. He was dead; there could be no doubt about that. No man could have lost the amount of blood that was swilling over the plating and remained alive.

Tillot looked at the dead man and listened to the water gurgling in the compartment below, saw the first of it splash up through the open hatch to dilute Abbotsford's blood. He knew that there was nothing more that he could do. Shakily, he made his way up to Control once more, pulled from its locker a survival suit, zippered himself into it. He started knocking up the dogs that would release one of the big viewports. Suddenly he looked outside, saw a surface craft, long, low and somehow sinister, lifting and falling on the surface of the sea just outside, saw the men, their faces pale in the dim light from his control room, who waved and gestured to him.

He hammered up the last dog, scrambled out through the port just as the tough glass fell clear, let hard, willing hands pull him aboard the rescue ship. He heard a sound like a great sigh as the last of the air was expelled from *Venus Girl's* broken hull.

He did not see her go.

Sea Adder lay off the coast, rolling in the swell. Inshore the lights of the towns that were one long string of suburbs from Sydney to Gabo Island sparkled invitingly.

"This," said *Sea Adder's* skipper, "is as far as we can bring you. You'll make it to the beach in your survival suit, all right. We've smeared it well with shark repellant. Ditch the suit as soon as you get to the beach; it should be deserted at this time of night. And remember, *don't mention us*. Not to anybody. We can do without the publicity re-

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sulting from the picking up of a shipwrecked spaceman."

"I understand," said Tillot.

He had known, of course, of the smugglers operating between Australia and the Theocratic Republic of New Zealand, of the traffic in liquor and tobacco and the other luxuries unobtainable in Theocracy. He had known, too, that the Australian Government was going through the motions of stamping out the trade. He had never dreamed that he would one day owe his life to such smugglers.

But the moral implications of smuggling were the least of his worries. At first, aboard the smugglers' ship, he had asked questions, then had realized that his questions were of such a character that his rescuers assumed that he was delirious. Then he had maintained a discreet silence, had tried to work out some sort of answer for himself.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Venus Girl, of course, could have traveled in a circle, great or small.

But . . .

But there had been the newspaper in the cabin into which he had been taken after his rescue, a not too old copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald.* At first glance it had seemed to be a year old, and he had remarked upon this to the Mate of the smuggler. The Mate had looked at him as though he were slightly mad.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Secondly, the clock had been put back.

But how?

How?

Had *Venus Girl,* when plunging through Space uncontrolled, exceeded the speed of light? Had she, in consequence, traveled back in Time? Or was there some other explanation? Could it be that by sheer, blind chance she had driven towards the exact spot where Earth had been a year in the past? Could it be that Time is somehow a function of the expanding Universe, or that the expansion of the Universe is linked in some odd way with Time? Tillot wished that he knew, and knew that it didn't much matter whether he knew or not. One thing mattered, one thing was of supreme importance. He was about to be given his second chance.

He shook hands with the crew of *Sea Adder,* slipped quietly over the side. He struck out for shore, the suit aiding rather than hindering his movements. There was an inshore set and he realized, quite suddenly, that the long line of lights along the promenade was very close. He let his legs sink, felt sand under

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his flippered feet. He waded up the beach.

As the smugglers had told him it would be, it was deserted. He stripped off his suit, stood there in the civilian shirt, shorts and sandals that they had given him. There was money in his pocket, and the key ring that he always carried with him. He supposed that the key would still fit the door of his apartment. But it had to. This was no alternative world—or was it? He wished that he could be sure.

There was an all-night cafe on the sea front. Tillot walked into it, saw that the time was shortly after three a.m. by the big wall clock, that the first editions of the morning papers were exposed for sale in the rack. He picked one up, walked with it to the counter, paid for it and ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee from the sleepy proprietor. His coffee was available at once. He sat down with it at the nearest table, sipped it while he read the paper.

He remembered the headlines—the mysterious meteorite, the suggestion that it could have been an alien ship from outside the System, the rioting in Venusburg. the opening of the Atlantic Tunnel. He remembered the headlines—and remembered what else had happened that day. He had been back on Earth, was on leave after a routine Martian voyage. He and Valerie had gone to a party that night. He had taken too much to drink. He had insisted on driving home, although the controls of the family ground car were far less familiar to him than the controls of his spaceship. He had insisted on driving, had met, at speed, another driver probably no more sober than he was himself, and . . .

And Valerie had been killed, and he had survived, and the well-meaning coroner, knowing that the publication of the true facts of the case would ruin Tillot's astronautical career, had stressed the fact that the accident had been due to the unforeseeable failure of the steering gear of Tillot's car.

But it hadn't happened yet.

It would never happen.

But what should he do? Should he go home, should he confront himself and say, "Look, Tillot, you're not going to the Weldons' party tonight. You can't hold your liquor." Or should he say, "Look, Tillot. I'm senior to you, by one year. Move out, will you, and let me move in . . ."

But was this the same world, in every detail?

There was one way to find out. He ignored the hamburger that had been set down before him, went into the phone booth. He inserted coins into the slot,

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punched his number. At the last moment he remembered to switch off the scanner. He heard the bell ringing. He saw the screen light up, saw his own face, sleepy and puzzled, heard a strange voice (but one's own voice is always strange without the facial cavities to give it resonance) say, "Tillot here. What do you want?"

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Wrong number." He hung up slowly and left the booth.

He remembered then that he had been awakened that morning by just such a call.

So . . .

He returned to his coffee and hamburger. He tried to remember the events of the day. He and Valerie had lived in each other's pockets throughout—and for him to confront his earlier self in the presence of Valerie would lead to unforeseeable complications. But I must see her, he thought. I *must*.

He went on trying to relive the past. He and Valerie had driven out to the Weldons fairly early in the evening. The Weldons were well-to-do, were one of the few families that owned a real house, standing in its own grounds, not far from Avalon. After dinner, nobody else being inclined to move, Tillot had wandered out into the garden to admire the scenery, to gaze out over the serene expanse of the Pacific.

And that, he thought, will be the best time.

Meanwhile, there was the day to fill in. He filled it in somehow. He traveled from cinema to cinema, using public transport, moving closer and closer to his goal. It was evening when he came out of the last one; a short subway ride followed by a short walk would bring him to his destination on time.

It did. He opened the Weldons' gate, remembering to feel thankful that Weldon had never bothered to have an alarm system and scanner installed. He saw the lighted ground floor windows, saw—and he wished that he could have stopped to gaze—Valerie, tall and slim and beautiful, standing, a glass in her hand, talking to her host and hostess. He walked round to the back of the house, to the edge of the cliff, saw a shadowy form and the glowing end of a cigarette.

"Tillot," he said.

His earlier self started, swung round to face him.

"Who are you?"

"You. Or me."

"What is this? Are you mad?"

"No. Tillot, I've come to tell you not to drive the car tonight."

Tillot had been drinking. Tillot, after a few drinks, was

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liable to be short tempered. Tillot flared, "I don't know who you are, but get out of here!"

"I've as much right here as you have," replied Tillot. "More, perhaps."

"Get out," snarled Tillot.

"*You* get out!" rasped Tillot, grasping the other's arm.

It was a short fight, although the antagonists were evenly matched. It would have been longer if one of them had not tripped over a root, had not fallen heavily, striking his head against a stone, the weight of the other on top of him adding force to the blow.

He thought, *He is dead.* He thought, *But he*—I?—*seriously considered suicide after Valerie was killed. So what does it matter? I've saved him*—me?—*the trouble, and I've saved Valerie . . .*

Almost without volition he stripped the corpse—luckily there were no bloodstains on the clothing—then removed his own garments. He dressed in the clothes that the other had been wearing, clad the other in his own shirt and shorts. He thought, *How very considerate of Jim Weldon to build his house on the edge of a cliff. I hope the sharks are hungry tonight . . .*

"Darling," said Valerie, "do you think you should drive?"

"He'll be all right," said Jim Weldon. "Just remember that that jalopy of yours isn't a rocket!"

"How," slurred Tillot, "could I ever forget?"

He opened the door of the car for Valerie, went round to the other side of the vehicle and let himself in. He pressed the starting button, heard the whine of the gas turbine. He let in the clutch, shot away from the curb. It was at the first corner of the winding road that the accident happened, the accident that might, perhaps, not have happened had the wheel not gone dead in Tillot's hands at the crucial moment.

Semi-conscious, in hospital, he was haunted by vague memories of a ship called *Venus Girl* and a scientist called Abbotsford. Semi-conscious, he told himself that it was only a matter of waiting and that next time he would play his cards more skillfully. He talked about it to his nurses and to anybody else who would listen, and the Staff Psychiatrist listened to his ravings and by careful suggestion, by sessions of hypnosis, cured him of his delusions, so that when he was discharged he remembered nothing except the accident and his almost unbearable loss.

When the call was made for volunteers for the first interstellar flight, he volunteered.

It was a habit. **THE END**

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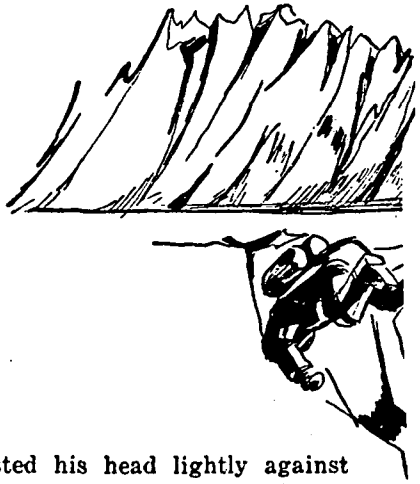
Whatever Gods There Be

By GORDON DICKSON

Out There, there is no day, no night. But for some men the blackness of the pit still spreads from pole to pole, and then they find out whether they are possessed of Henley's "Unconquerable soul."



AT 1420 hours of the eighth day on the moon, Major Robert L. (Doc) Greene was standing over a slide in a microscope in the tiny laboratory of Moon Ship Groundbreaker II. There was a hinged seat that could be pulled up and locked in position, to sit on; but Greene never used it. At the moment, he had been taking blood counts on the four of them that were left in the crew, when a high white and a low red blood cell count of one sample had caught his attention. He had proceeded to follow up the tentative diagnosis this suggested, as coldly as if the sample had been that of some complete stranger. But, suddenly, the scene in the field of the microscope had blurred. And for a moment he closed both eyes and rested his head lightly against the microscope. The metal eyepiece felt cool against his eyelid; and caused an after-image to blossom against the hooded retina—as of a volcanic redness welling outward against a blind-dark background. It was his own deep-held inner fury exploding against an intractible universe.

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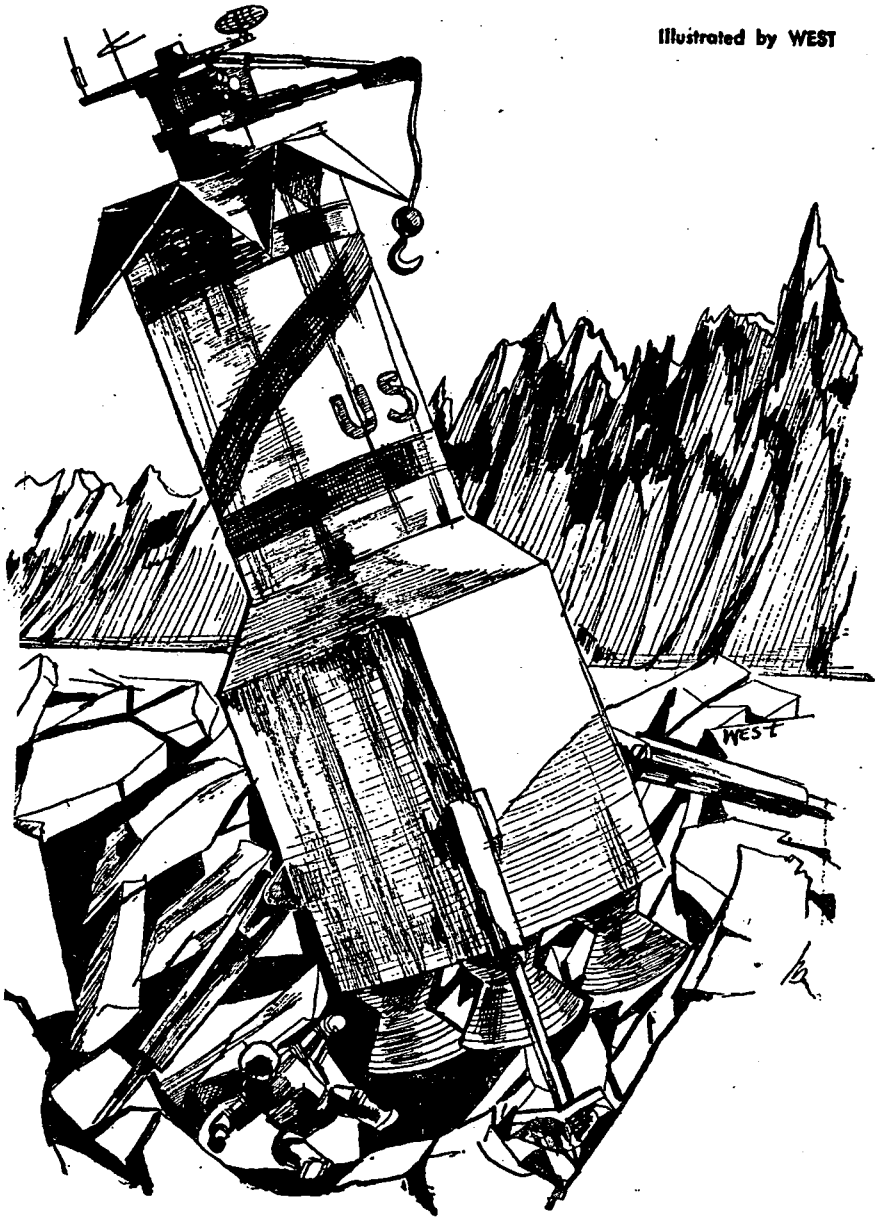
Illustrated by WEST



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Caught up in this image and his own savage emotion, Greene did not hear Captain Edward Kronzy, who just then clumped into the lab, still wearing his moonsuit, except for the helmet.

"Something wrong, Bob?" asked Kronzy. The youngest of the original six-officer crew, he was about average height—as were all the astronauts—and his reddish, cheerful complexion contrasted with shock of stiff black hair and scowling, thirty-eight year old visage of Greene.

"Nothing," said Greene, harshly, straightening up and slipping the slide out of the microscope into a breast pocket. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," said Kronzy, with a pale grin that only made more marked the dark circles under his eyes. "But Hal wants you outside to help jacking up."

"All right," said Greene. He put the other three slides back in their box; and led the way out of the lab toward the airlock. In the pocket, the glass slide pressed sharp-edged and unyielding against the skin of his chest, beneath. It had given Greene no choice but to diagnos a cancer of the blood—leukemia.

TEN MINUTES later, Greene and Kronzy joined the two other survivors of Project Moon Landing outside on the moon's surface.

These other two—Lt. Colonel Harold (Hal) Barth, and Captain James Wallach—were some eighty-five feet above the entrance of the airlock, on the floor of the Mare Imbrium. Greene and Kronzy came toiling up the rubbled slope of the pit where the ship lay; and emerged onto the crater floor just as Barth and Wallach finished hauling the jack into position at the pit's edge.

Around them, the crater floor on this eighth day resembled a junk yard. A winch had been set up about ten feet back from the pit five days before; and now oxygen tanks, plumbing fixtures, spare clothing, and a host of other items were spread out fanwise from the edge where the most easily ascendible slope of the pit met the crater floor—at the moment brilliantly outlined by the sun of the late lunar 'afternoon'. A sun now alone in the sky, since the Earth at the moment was on the other side of the moon. A little off to one side of the junk were two welded metal crosses propped erect by rocks.

The crosses represented 1st Lieutenant Saul Moulton and Captain Luthern J. White, who were somewhere under the rock rubble beneath the ship in the pit.

"Over here, Bob," Greene heard in the earphones of his helmet. He looked and saw Barth

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beckoning with a thick-gloved hand. "We're going to try setting her up as if in a posthole."

Greene led Kronzy over to the spot. When he got close, he could see through the faceplates of their helmets that the features of the other two men, particularly the thin, handsome features of Barth, were shining with sweat. The eighteen-foot jack lay with its base end projecting over a hole ground out of solid rock.

"What's the plan?" said Greene.

Barth's lips puffed with a weary exhalation of breath before he answered. The face of the Moon Expedition's captain was finedrawn with exhaustion; but, Greene noted with secret satisfaction, with no hint of defeat in it yet. Greene relaxed slightly, sweeping his own grim glance around the crater, over the hole, the discarded equipment and the three other men.

A man, he thought, could do worse than to have made it this far.

"One man to anchor. The rest to lift," Barth was answering him.

"And I'm the anchor?" asked Greene.

"You're the anchor," answered Barth.

Greene went to the base end of the jack and picked up a length of metal pipe that was lying ready there. He shoved it into the hole and leaned his weight on it, against the base of the jack.

"Now!" he called, harshly.

The men at the other end heaved. It was not so much the jack's weight, under moon gravity, as the labor of working in the clumsy moonsuits. The far end of the jack wavered, rose, slipped gratingly against Greene's length of pipe—swayed to one side, lifted again as the other three men moved hand under hand along below it—and approached the vertical.

The base of the jack slipped suddenly partway into the hole, stuck, and threatened to collapse Greene's arms. His fingers were slippery in the gloves, he smelled the stink of his own perspiration inside the suit, and his feet skidded a little in the surface dust and rock.

"Will it go?" cried Barth gaspingly in Greene's earphones.

"Keep going!" snarled Greene, the universe dissolving into one of his white-hot rages—a passion in which only he and the jack existed; and it must yield. "Lift, damn you! Lift!"

THE pipe vibrated and bent. The jack swayed—rose—and plunged suddenly into the socket hole, tearing the pipe from Greene's grasp. Greene, left pushing against nothing, fell forward, then rolled over on his back. Above him, twelve pro-

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truding feet of the jack quivered soundlessly.

Greene got to his feet. He was wringing wet. Barth's faceplate suddenly loomed before him.

"You all right?" Barth's voice asked in his earphones.

"All right?" said Greene. He stared; and burst suddenly into loud raucous laughter, that scaled upward toward uncontrollability. He choked it off. Barth was still staring at him. "No, I broke my neck from the fall," said Greene roughly. "What'd you think?"

Barth nodded and stepped back. He looked up at the jack.

"That'll do," he said. "We'll get the winch cable from that to the ship's nose and jack her vertical with no sweat."

"Yeah," said Kronzy. He was standing looking down into the pit. "No sweat."

The other three turned and looked into the pit as well, down where the ship lay at a thirty degree angle against one of the pit's sides. It was a requiem moment for Moulton and White who lay buried there; and all the living men above felt it at the same time. Chance had made a choice among them—there was no more justice to it than that.

The ship had landed on what seemed a flat crater floor. Landed routinely, upright, and apparently solidly. Only, twenty hours later, as Moulton and White had been outside setting up the jack they had just assembled—the jack whose purpose was to correct the angle of the ship for takeoff—chance had taken its hand.

What caused it—lunar landslip, vibration over flawed rock, or the collapse of a bubble blown in the molten rock when the moon was young—would have to be for those who came after to figure out. All the four remaining men who were inside knew was that one moment all was well; and the next they were flung about like pellets in a rattle that a baby shakes. When they were able to get outside and check, they found the ship in a hundred foot deep pit, in which Moulton and White had vanished.

"Well," said Barth, "I guess we might as well knock off now, and eat. Then, Jimmy—" his faceplate turned toward Wallach. "you and Ed can come up here and get that cable attached while I go over the lists you all gave me of your equipment we can still strip from the ship; and I'll figure out if she's light enough to lift on the undamaged tubes. And Bob—you can get back to whatever you were doing."

"Yeah," said Greene. "Yeah, I'll do that."

AFTER they had all eaten, Greene shut himself up once

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more in the tiny lab to try to come to a decision. From a military point of view, it was his duty to inform the commanding officer—Barth—of the diagnosis he had just made. But the peculiar relationship existing between himself and Barth—

There was a knock on the door.

"Come on in!" said Greene.

Barth opened the door and stuck his head in.

"You're not busy."

"Matter of opinion," he said. "What is it?"

Barth came all the way in, shut the door behind him, and leaned against the sink.

"You're looking pretty washed out, Bob," he said.

"We all are. Never mind me," said Greene. "What's on your mind?"

"A number of things," said Barth. "I don't have to tell you what it's like with the whole Space Program. You know as well as I do."

"Thanks," said Greene.

The sarcasm in his voice was almost absent-minded. Insofar as gratitude had a part in his makeup, he was grateful to Barth for recognizing what few other people had—how much the work of the Space Program had become a crusade to which his whole soul and body was committed.

"We just can't afford not to succeed." Barth was saying.

It was the difference between them, noted Greene. Barth admitted the possibility of not succeeding. Nineteen years the two men had been close friends—since high school. And nowdays, to many people, Barth *was* the Space Program. Good-looking, brilliant, brave—and possessing that elusive quality which makes for newsworthiness at public occasions and on the tv screens—Barth had been a shot in the arm to the Program these last six months.

And he had been needed. No doubt the Russian revelations of extensive undersea developments in the Black Sea Area had something to do with it. Probably the lessening of world tensions lately had contributed. But it had taken place—one of those unexplainable shifts in public interest which have been the despair of promotion men since the breed was invented.

The world had lost much of its interest in spatial exploration.

No matter that population pressures continued to mount. No matter that natural resources depletion was accelerating, in spite of all attempt at control. Suddenly—space exploration had become old hat; taken for granted.

And those who had been against it from the beginning began to gnaw, unchecked, at the roots of the Program. So that

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men like Barth, to whom the Space Program had become a way of life, worried, seeing gradual strangulation as an alternative to progress. But men like Greene, to whom the Program had become life itself, hated, seeing *no* alternative.

"Who isn't succeeding?" said Greene.

"We lost Luthern and Saul," said Barth, glancing downward almost instinctively toward where the two officers must be buried. "We've got to get back."

"Sure. Sure," said Greene.

"I mean," said Barth, "we've got to get back, no matter what the cost. We've got to show them we could get a ship up here and get back again. You know, Bob —" he looked almost appealingly at Greene—"the trouble with a lot of people who're not in favor of the Project is they don't really believe in the moon or anyplace like it. I mean—the way they'd believe in Florida, or the South Pole. They're sort of half-clinging to the notion it's just a sort of cut-out circle of silver paper up in the air, there, after all. But if we go and come back, they've *got to* believe!"

"Listen," said Greene. "Don't worry about people like that. They'll all be dead in forty years, anyway. —Is this all you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No. Yes—I guess," said Barth. He smiled tiredly at Greene. "You pick me up, Bob. I guess it's just a matter of doing what you have to."

"Do what you're going to do," said Greene with a shrug. "Why make a production out of it?"

"Yes." Barth straightened up. "You're right. Well, I'll get back to work. See you in a little while. We'll get together for a pow-wow as soon as Ed and Jimmy get back in from stringing that cable."

"Right," said Greene. He watched the slim back and square shoulders of Barth go out the door and slumped against the sink, himself, chewing savagely on a thumbnail. His instinct had been right, he thought; it was not the time to tell Barth about the diagnosis.

And not only that. Nineteen years had brought Greene to the point where he could, in almost a practical sense, read the other man's mind. He had just done so; and right now he was willing to bet that he had a new reason for worry.

Barth had something eating on him. Chewing his fingernail, Greene set to work to puzzle out just what that could be.

A fist hammered on the lab door. "Bob?"

"What?" said Greene, starting up out of his brown study. Some little time had gone by. He recognized his caller now. Kronzy.

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"Hal wants us in the control cabin, right away."

"Okay. Be right there."

Greene waited until Kronzy's boot sounds had gone away in the distance down the short corridor and up the ladder to the level overhead. Then he followed, more slowly.

He discovered the other four already jammed in among the welter of instruments and controls that filled this central space of the ship.

"What's the occasion?" he asked, cramming himself in between the main control screen and an acceleration couch.

"Ways and means committee," said Barth, with a small smile. "I was waiting until we were all together before I said anything." He held up a sheet of paper. "I've just totalled up all the weight we can strip off the ship, using the lists of dispensable items each of you made up, and checked it against the thrust we can expect to get safely from the undamaged tubes. We're about fifteen hundred Earth pounds short. I made the decision to drop off the water tanks, the survival gear, and a few other items, which brings us down to being about five hundred pounds short."

He paused and laid down the paper on a hinge-up desk surface beside him.

"I'm asking for suggestions," he said.

Greene looked around the room with sudden fresh grimness. But he saw no comprehension yet, on the faces of the other two crew members.

"How about—" began Kronzy; then hesitated as the words broke off in the waiting silence of the others.

"Go on, Ed," said Barth.

"We're not short of fuel."

"That's right."

"Then why," said Kronzy, "can't we rig some sort of auxiliary burners—like the jato units you use to boost a plane off, you know?" He glanced at Greene and Wallach, then back at Barth. "We wouldn't have to care whether they burnt up or not—just as long as they lasted long enough to get us off."

"That's a good suggestion, Ed," said Barth, slowly. "The only hitch is, I looked into that possibility, myself. And it isn't possible. We'd need a machine shop. We'd need—it just isn't possible. It'd be easier to repair the damaged tubes."

"I suppose that isn't possible, either?" said Greene, sharply.

Barth looked over at him, then quickly looked away again.

"I wasn't serious," Barth said. "For that we'd need Cape Canaveral right here beside us. —And then, probably not."

He looked over at Wallach.

"Jimmy?" he said.

Wallach frowned.

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"By golly, Hal," he said. "I don't know. I can think about it a bit. . . ."

"Maybe," said Barth, "That's what we all ought to do. Everybody go off by themselves and chew on the problem a bit." He turned around and seated himself at the desk surface. "I'm going to go over these figures again."

Slowly, they rose. Wallach went out, followed by Kronzy. Greene hesitated, looking at Barth, then he turned away and left the room.

ALONE once more in the lab, Greene leaned against the sink again and thought. He did not, however, think of mass-to-weight ratios or clever ways of increasing the thrust of the rocket engines.

Instead, he thought of leukemia. And the fact that it was still a disease claiming its hundred per cent of fatalities. But also, he thought of Earth with its many-roomed hospitals; and the multitude of good men engaged in cancer research. Moreover, he thought of the old medical truism that while there is life, there is hope.

All this reminded him of Earth, itself. And his thoughts veered off to a memory of how pleasant it had been, on occasion, after working all the long night through, to step out through a door and find himself unexpectedly washed by the clean air of dawn. He thought of vacations he had never had, fishing he had never done, and the fact that he might have found a woman to love him if he had ever taken off enough time to look for her. He thought of good music—he had always loved good music. And he remembered that he had always intended someday to visit La Scala.

Then—hauling his mind back to duty with a jerk—he began to scowl and ponder the weak and strong points that he knew about in Barth's character. Not, this time, to anticipate what the man would say when they were all once more back in the control cabin. But for the purpose of circumventing and trapping Barth into a position where Barth would be fenced in by his own principles—the ultimate ju-jitsu of human character manipulation. Greene growled and muttered to himself, in the privacy of the lab marking important points with his forefinger in the artificial and flatly odorous air.

He was still at it, when Kronzy banged at his door again and told him everybody else was already back in the control cabin.

WHEN he got to the control cabin again, the rest were in almost the identical positions they had taken previously.

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"Well?" said Barth, when Greene had found himself a niche of space. He looked about the room, at each in turn. "How about you, Jimmy?"

"The four acceleration couches we've still got in the ship—. With everything attached to them, they weigh better than two hundred apiece," said Wallach. "Get rid of two of them, and double up in the two left. That gets rid of four of our five hundred pounds. Taking off from the moon isn't as rough as taking off from Earth."

"I'm afraid it won't work," Kronzy commented.

"Why not?"

"Two to a couch, right?"

"Right."

"Well, look. They're made for one man. Just barely. You can cram two in by having both of them lying on their sides. That's all right for the two who're just passengers—but what about the man at the controls?" He nodded at Barth. "He's got to fly the ship. And how can he do that with half of what he needs to reach behind him, and the man next to him blocking off his reach at the other half?" Kronzy paused. "Besides, I'm telling you—half a couch isn't going to help hardly at all. You remember how the G's felt, taking off? And this time all that ecceleration is going to be pressing against one set of ribs and a hipbone."

He stopped talking then.

"We'll have to think of something else. Any suggestions, Ed?" said Barth.

"Oh." Kronzy took a deep breath. "Toss out my position taking equipment. All the radio equipment, too. Shoot for Earth blind, deaf and dumb; and leave it up to them down there to find us and bring us home."

"How much weight would that save?" asked Wallach.

"A hundred and fifty pounds—about."

"A hundred and fifty!" Where'd you figure the rest to come from?"

"I didn't know," said Kronzy, wearily. "It was all I could figure to toss, beyond what we've already planned to throw out. I was hoping you other guys could come up with the rest."

He looked at Barth.

"Well, it's a good possibility, Ed," said Barth. He turned his face to Greene. "How about you, Bob?"

"Get out and push!" said Greene. "My equipment's figured to go right down to the last gram. There isn't any more. You want my suggestion—we can all dehydrate ourselves about eight to ten pounds per man between now and takeoff. That's it."

"That's a good idea, too," said Barth. "Every pound counts." He looked haggard around the eyes, Greene noticed. It had the effect

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of making him seem older than he had half an hour before during their talk in the lab; but Greene knew this to be an illusion.

"Thank you," Barth went on. "I knew you'd all try hard. I'd been hoping you'd come up with some things I had overlooked myself. More important than any of us getting back, of course, is getting the ship back. Proving something like this will work, to the people who don't believe in it."

Greene coughed roughly; and roughly cleared his throat.

"—We can get rid of one acceleration couch as Ed suggests," Barth continued. "We can dehydrate ourselves as Bob suggested, too; just to be on the safe side. That's close to two hundred and fifty pounds reduction. Plus a hundred and fifty for the navigational and radio equipment. There's three hundred and ninety to four hundred. Add one man with his equipment and we're over the hump with a safe eighty to a hundred pound margin."

He had added the final for a minute it did not register on those around him.

—Then, abruptly, it did.

"A man?" said Kronzy.

There was a second moment of silence—but this was like the fractionary interval of no sound in which the crowd in the grandstand suddenly realizes that the stunt flyer in the small plane is not coming out of his spin.

"I think," said Barth, speaking suddenly and loudly in the stillness, "that, as I say, the important thing is getting the ship back down. We've got to convince those people that write letters to the newspapers that something like this is possible. So the job can go on."

They were still silent, looking at him.

"It's our duty, I believe," said Barth, "to the Space Project. And to the people back there; and to ourselves. I think it's something that has to be done."

He looked at each of them in turn.

NOW Hal—wait!" burst out Wallach, as Barth's eyes came on him. "That's going a little overboard, isn't it? I mean—we can figure out something!"

"Can we?" Barth shook his head. "Jimmy—. There just isn't any more. If they shoot you for not paying your bills, then it doesn't help to have a million dollars in your debts add up to a million dollars and five cents. You know that. If the string doesn't reach, it doesn't reach. Everything we can get rid of on this ship won't be enough. Not if we want her to fly."

Wallach opened his mouth again; and then shut it. Kronzy

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looked down at his boots. Greene's glance went savagely across the room to Barth.

"Well," said Kronzy. He looked up. Kronzy, too, Greene thought, now looked older. "What do we do—draw straws?"

"No," Barth said. "I'm in command here. I'll pick the man."

"*Pick* the man!" burst out Wallach, staring. "You—"

"Shut up, Jimmy!" said Kronzy. He was looking hard at Barth. "Just what did you have in mind, Hal?" he said, slowly.

"That's all." Barth straightened up in his corner of the control room. "The rest is my responsibility. The rest of you get back to work tearing out the disposable stuff still in the ship —"

"I think," said Kronzy, quietly and stubbornly, "we ought to draw straws."

"You—" said Wallach. He had been staring at Barth ever since Kronzy had told him to shut up. "*You'd* be the one, Hal?"

"That's all," said Barth, again. "Gentlemen, this matter is not open for discussion."

"The hell," replied Kronzy, "you say. You may be paper CO of this bunch; but we are just not about to play Captain-go-down-with-his-ship. We all weigh between a hundred-sixty and a hundred and eighty pounds and that makes us equal in the sight of mathematics. Now, we're going to draw straws; and if you won't draw, Hal, we'll draw one for you; and if you won't abide by the draw, we'll strap you in the other acceleration couch and one of us can fly the ship out of here. Right, Jimmy? Bob?"

He glared around at the other two. Wallach opened his mouth, hesitated, then spoke.

"Yes," he said. I guess that's right."

Kronzy stared at him suddenly. Wallach looked away.

"Just a minute," said Barth.

They looked at him. He was holding a small, black, automatic pistol.

"I'm sorry," Barth said. "But I am in command. And I intend to stay in command, even if I have to cripple every one of you, strip the ship and strap you into couches myself." He looked over at Greene. "Bob. *You'll* be sensible, won't you?"

GREENE exploded suddenly into harsh laughter. He laughed so hard he had to blink tears out of his eyes before he could get himself under control.

"Sensible!" he said. "Sure, I'll be sensible. And look after myself at the same time—even if it does take some of the glory out of it." He grinned almost maliciously at Barth. "Much as I hate to rob anybody else of the spotlight—it just so happens one of us can stay behind here until

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rescued and live to tell his grandchildren about it."

They were all looking at him.

"Sure," said Greene. "There'll be more ships coming, won't there? In fact, they'll have no choice in the matter, if they got a man up here waiting to be rescued."

"How?" said Kronzy.

"Ever hear of suspended animation?" Greene turned to the younger man. "Deep-freeze. Out there in permanent shadow we've got just about the best damn deep freeze that ever was invented. The man who stays behind just takes a little nap until saved. In fact, from his point of view, he'll barely close his eyes before they'll be waking him up; probably back on Earth."

"You mean this?" said Barth.

"Of course, I mean it!"

Barth looked at Kronzy.

"Well, Ed," he said. "I guess that takes care of your objections."

"Hold on a minute!" Greene said. "I hope you don't think still you're going to be the one to stay. This is my idea; and I've got first pick at it. —Besides, done up in moonsuits the way we are outside there, I couldn't work it on anybody else. Whoever gets frozen has got to know what to do by himself; and I'm the only one who fits the bill." His eyes swept over all of them. "So that's the choice."

Barth frowned just slightly.

"Why didn't you mention this before, Bob?" he said.

"Didn't think of it—until you came up with your notion of leaving one man behind. And then it dawned on me. It's simple —for anyone who knows how."

Barth slowly put the little gun away in a pocket of his coveralls.

"I'm not sure still, I—" he began slowly.

"Why don't you drop it?" blazed Greene in sudden fury. "You think you're the only one who'd like to play hero? I've got news for you. I've given the Project everything I've got for a number of years now; but I'm the sort of man who gets forgotten easily. You can bet your boots I won't be forgotten when they have to come all the way from Earth to save me. It's my deal; and you're not going to cut me out of it. And what—" he thrust his chin at Barth—"are you going to do if I simply refuse to freeze anybody but myself? Shoot me?"

Barth shook his head slowly, his eyes shadowed with pain.

ROCKET signal rifle held athwart behind him and legs spread, piratically, Greene stood where the men taking off in the rockets could see him in the single control screen that was left in the ship. Below, red light blossomed suddenly down in the

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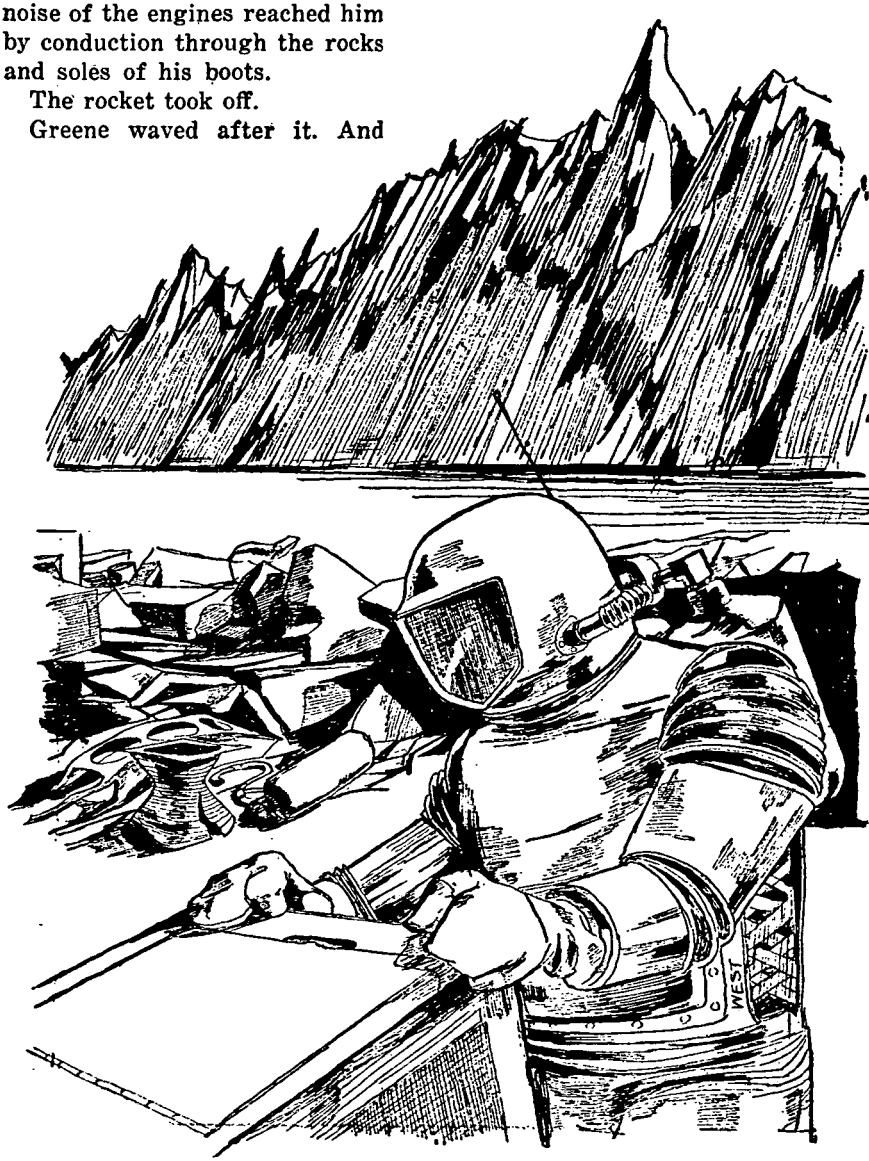
pit. The moon's surface trembled under Greene's feet and the noise of the engines reached him by conduction through the rocks and soles of his boots.

The rocket took off.

Greene waved after it. And



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then wondered why he had done so. Bravado? But there was no one around to witness bravado now. The other three were on their way to Earth—and they would make it. Greene walked over and shut off the equipment they had set up to record the takeoff. The surrounding area looked more like a junkyard than ever. He reached clumsy gloved fingers into an outside pocket of his moonsuit and withdrew the glass slide. With one booted heel he ground it into the rock.

The first thing they would do with the others would be to give them thorough physical checks, after hauling them out of the south Atlantic. And when that happened, Barth's leukemia would immediately be discovered. In fact, it was a yet-to-be-solved mystery why it had not shown up during routine medical tests before this. After that—well, while there was life, there was hope.

At any rate, live or die, Barth, the natural identification figure for these watching the Project, would hold the spotlight of public attention for another six months at least. And if he held it from a hospital bed, so much the better. Greene would pass and be forgotten between two bites of breakfast toast. But Barth—that was something else again.

The Project would be hard to starve to death with Barth dying slowly and uncomplaining before the eyes of taxpayers.

Greene dropped the silly signal rifle. The rocket flame was out of sight now. He felt with gloved hands at the heat control unit under the thick covering of his moonsuit and clumsily crushed it. He felt it give and break. It was amazing, he thought, the readiness of the laity to expect miracles from the medical profession. Anyone with half a brain should have guessed that something which normally required the personnel and physical resources of a hospital, could not be managed alone, without equipment, and on the naked surface of the moon.

Barth would undoubtedly have guessed it—if he had not been blinded by Greene's wholly unfair implication that Barth was a glory-hunter. Of course, in the upper part of his mind, Barth must know it was not true; but he was too good a man not to doubt himself momentarily when accused. After that, he had been unable to wholly trust his own reasons for insisting on being the one to stay behind.

He'll forgive me, thought Greene. He'll forgive me, afterwards, when he figures it all out.

He shook off his sadness that had come with the thought. Barth had been his only friend. All his life, Greene's harsh, sardonic

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exterior had kept people at a distance. Only Barth had realized that under Greene's sarcasms and jibes he was as much a fool with stars in his eyes as the worst of them. Well, thank heaven he had kept his weakness decently hidden.

He started to lie down, then changed his mind. It was probably the most effective position for what time remained; but it went against his grain that the men who came after him should find him flat on his back in this junkyard.

Greene began hauling equipment together until he had a sort of low seat. But when he had it all constructed, this, too was unsatisfactory.

Finally he built it a little higher. The moonsuit was very stiff, anyway. In the end, he needed only a little propping for his back and arms. He was turned in the direction in which the Earth would raise over the Moon's horizon; and, although the upper half of him was still in sunlight, long shadows of utter blackness were pooling about his feet.

Definitely, the lower parts of his moonsuit were cooling now. It occurred to him that possibly he would freeze by sections in this position. No matter, it was a relatively painless death. —Forgive me, he thought in Barth's direction, lost among the darkness of space and the light of the stars. —It would have been a quicker, easier end for you this way, I know. But you and I both were always blank checks to be filled out on demand and paid into the account of Man's future. It was only then that we could have had any claim to lives of our own.

As Greene had now, in these final seconds.

He pressed back against the equipment he had built up. It held him solidly. This little, harmless pleasure he gave his own grim soul. Up here in the airlessness of the moon's bare surface, nothing could topple him over now.

When the crew of the next ship came searching, they would find what was left of him still on his feet.

THE END

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School For Conquerors

By ADAM CHASE

Do you think Napoleon just happened?—that Alexander the Great turned up through chance? So did Harry until some strange people said, "look alert, bub. We've picked you for immortality."

WHEN the freckle-faced boy from Brooklyn sagged limply into the arms of the two medical corps men at the head of the line, Harry Kendricks was thinking in terms of two years, not two thousand.

Some people were like that, Harry thought. The medic on the left was administering a shot for typhus, the one on the right a shot for tetanus. "Watch out for the needle with the hook!" someone had yelled behind the boy from Brooklyn, and the freckled face had faded a livid white. Harry Kendricks was still thinking in terms of two years when the line of men clad in G.I. shorts began shuffling forward once more. Two years wasn't too bad. Two years were expected of him.

By the time Harry reached the head of the line, the boy from Brooklyn was resting comfortably on a cot. Harry extended his bare arms and waited for the pricks of the two hypodermic needles.

All at once he felt a sensation of giddiness wash over him. He thought, this is ridiculous. I'm not the type. I'll never be able to live it down. I'm not going to pass out just because a couple of hypodermic needles are about to pierce my skin. But the dizziness persisted. The medic on his left was looking at him anxiously.

"Take it easy, soldier," he said.

The medic on the right

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In this situation, passing out could become an epidemic.

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said, "This is hardly going to hurt at all."

The medic on the left had a large-nosed, good-natured face. He had a look of concern on his face, as if it were his fault if any of the new Army recruits in line fainted before the shots were administered.

Concentrate on his face, Harry thought. You're not scared. There's no reason for you to faint. You've knocked around some, Harry. You've never felt like this before. Of course you're anxious. You're over-wrought. This is the beginning of your two years in the Army.

The concentration failed to help. Harry pitched forward on his face. The last thing he remembered was that the floor seemed an incredibly long way off.

"Kendricks, 1957 A.D.!" a voice blared metallically. "Kendricks to Control Center!"

Harry sat up and glanced about him. Apparently he had been moved from the big medical center room at Camp Kilmer where the shots were given. He was seated on the floor of a small, bare, white-walled cubicle. There was no furniture in the place and only one door, which was closed. Above the door Harry saw what he took to be the grill of a wall microphone. It was from this point that the metallic voice had issued.

"Kendricks, 1957 A.D.!" the voice called again. "You are overdue in Control Center."

Shrugging, Harry got to his feet and headed for the door. Before he could reach it, though, the door opened in toward him. He blinked. He rubbed his eyes. If this was the Army, it was a new one on him.

A girl stood there in the open doorway. If she were a Wac, the Wacs had suddenly discarded their uniforms in favor of trim white shorts and halter which would have shocked anyone from General Grunther on down. "Mara is my name," she said. "You're Kendricks, right?"

"Right, but—"

"Please come with me."

Mara was too damned pretty. A beautiful girl like that didn't join the Wacs. And a Wac sure as heck didn't go around in what amounted to underwear.

"I'm sorry about what happened before," Harry said.

"What was that?"

"When they were giving

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the shots. It must have been the heat or something, I guess."

"Oh, that." Mara was still smiling. She led Harry out into a hallway with gleaming metal walls. There were no doors except the one through which they had left his small room.

"Where the devil are we?" Harry demanded.

"Geographically?"

"What other way is there?"

"Geographically, you have not moved at all. This was the State of New Jersey."

"I don't get it. This doesn't look like Camp Kilmer."

"It isn't. Temporally, you've done some fancy traveling."

"Temporally?" That was a queer way of saying he had been unconscious a pretty long time.

"Yes, temporally. Through time. You were drafted in the year 1957, right?"

"Sure. Like a couple of million other guys, I can't wait for 1959 to roll around."

Mara was still smiling. "You're a little late," she said.

"I'm what?"

"Late. This is the year 3957."

Harry said nothing. He had somehow found his way into the psycho section of the Medical Processing Center at Camp Kilmer. But that still didn't explain the Wac's uniform, or lack of uniform. The year 3957. Sure, just like that. He had snoozed two thousand years. Brother, was this girl nutty.

"Here we are at Control Center," Mara said.

The wall was an expanse of polished silver, but even as Mara spoke, a tiny gleaming spot appeared on it. The spot expanded, glowing. It was now a round doorway wide enough to admit two people abreast. That was a neat trick, Harry thought. Too neat. It hardly seemed to impress Mara.

"Kendricks! Kendricks!" the now-familiar metallic voice blared.

"Here," Mara reported in for Harry.

There was a babble of other voices as a score of other female guides answered for their charges. Harry hardly heard the names. The men were all in various stages of undress, as if they had been snatched, as he had, at that precise period in life when they had stripped off their civilian clothing and had not yet been issued their uniforms.

The metallic voice began to

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issue instructions. "The Athenian and the Lydian to Room 3. The Hessian and the Boer, Room 4. The Cuban and the Indian, Room 5. The American and the Corsican, Room 6. Please hurry." There was no time to question.

Where there had been no other doors out in the hallway, there now were several. Harry accepted them: they were there. Maybe it was done with mirrors. Maybe that's why he hadn't seen the doors before. With Mara at his side, he fell into step with a short, intense-looking young man with alert, smouldering eyes. Walking with the short man, the Corsican, was another girl whom Mara called Josine.

The four of them sat down in Room 6, which was bare except for the four chairs which had been provided for them. When half an hour passed, Harry shifted uncomfortably in the chair and said, "Listen, Mara. I don't know how I got here or what kind of gag this is, but you're getting me in a mess of trouble. If this isn't Camp Kilmer, then I'm AWOL. Maybe it's a big joke to you, but it's not funny to me."

"AWOL? That's absent without official leave? Yes, you're AWOL. Two thousand years AWOL, Harry."

"Cut out that baloney. I want to—"

But Mara wasn't listening to him. She had turned her face to Josine, who was talking in an unfamiliar language. "It is always the same," Mara said finally. "Your companion complains he is absent without official leave from the royal military school at Brienne. But if each of you now displayed the patience which will be so necessary to you later, I would be gratified and so would Josine."

Just then, two large men, each a full head taller than six feet, entered the room. They were wearing shorts and their limbs were muscled like steel. "Which one is the American?" One of them demanded.

Harry stood up. "That's me."

Nodding, the big man swung his right fist at Harry without warning. Harry took the blow at the base of his jaw and tumbled over backwards. He got up swearing and waded into the big man, fists flailing. This at least was something he could understand. The big man parried his wild lunges apparently without effort. A well-

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timed left hook sent Harry reeling again.

"The first thing you must learn," Mara said coolly, "is how to defend yourself."

Harry scrambled to his feet and waded into the big man. He got in two good left jabs before he landed on his back again. He stood up on rubbery legs and was dimly aware that the short Corsican was also getting his lumps from the other big man. He moved forward stubbornly and when he was floored again he found he could not get up under his own power.

"We'll teach you how to fight," the big man promised.

In the days which followed, they did. There came a time when Harry could hold his own with the big, laconic fighter who spent an hour with him every morning, boxing and wrestling. There came a time when Harry could beat the big man consistently in bare-fisted fighting.

After that, Harry's boxing tutor was replaced by a speech teacher. The man spoke English, but so persuasively, so perfectly, he had an almost hypnotic effect. He taught Harry all the rhetorical tricks he knew—the pause for emphasis, the slow building of the voice until you unleash it with all the pent up fury of a storm, the intense whisper which holds your audience as a magnet holds iron filings, the *sotto voce* for necessary factual data between rhetorical outbursts.

Mara remained at Harry's side, a patient coach in everything. The Corsican and Josine were always together, too, reviewing the short, intense man's course of instruction, which seemed to parallel Harry's. A teacher of mob psychology—plural psychology, he called it—followed the speech instructor. There were courses in logic, in mathematics, in law, history, science, the arts. Harry lost all track of time but realized that somehow he never forgot anything they taught him. His memory, which had never been anything but mediocre, had become perfect. He felt a sharpness about his body and his mind which he had never experienced before. He was alert, knife-edged, poised, ready for anything.

One day Mara told him, "Well, that's it."

"That's what?"

"The end of your course of

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instruction. We've done all we can."

"And you're still trying to tell me this is two thousand years in the future?"

"That's right."

"Then how come my history lessons ended with the year 1957?"

"We never teach a man the future. We let the future unfold—when he gets back to his own age."

"Listen to me, Mara. You're all right. I like you. But you keep giving me little nibbles of information without telling the whole story. One of these days—"

"Exactly. One of these days you will understand everything."

"See? There you go again."

"No, I am to explain things to you soon."

"I want to understand, Mara. I want to like you. I—"

"Oh, you like me," Mara said secretly. "It isn't what you want or don't want. I was chosen as your guide because emotionally, physically, and mentally it was known you would find me attractive." She sounded so matter of fact.

"That's also what I mean," Harry said grimly. "Talking like that. Maybe it's true, I don't know. But you take the poetry out of everything when you talk like that."

"Is this poetry enough for you?" And Mara leaned forward, sliding with languid passionate grace into Harry's arms. He was aware of her—keenly, intensely, vitally—more than he had ever been aware of a woman, so much that he could almost sense the love growing between them. He wondered suddenly, are Josine and the Corsican playing this identical scene somewhere nearby? He thrust Mara away from him.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked.

"I just want to know what's going on now, that's all. If I really have traveled two thousand years through time, I want you to tell me why. Right now."

"I'm not supposed—"

"The devil with what you're supposed to do. I'm falling in love with you. Doesn't that mean anything?"

Soberly she said, "I was in love with you before I even saw you. They made sure of that."

"What I mean. Who's 'they'?"

"Harry, listen to me. All right, I'll tell you—as much as I dare. The world—well,

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the world goes on, day after day, year after year, generations and centuries, civilizations rising and falling and new ones being born—did you ever wonder how this happens?"

"I don't get what you're driving at," Harry said.

"In any given time, man seems bent on his own destruction. Somehow, he manages to survive. Put it this way. At times of grave internal danger to the human race, a great leader somehow manages to appear on the scene and put things straight just when it seems as if civilization is heading for the final fall. Doesn't that seem—well, too much of a coincidence?"

"Maybe we're just lucky."

Mara laughed softly. "You think it's lucky? If you only knew how much sweat and hard work and dead-ends and patience that 'luck' takes, here in 3957 A.D. Harry, we *manufacture* the great leaders who in every age must save mankind!"

"Manufacture?"

"Exactly. Greece needed one, long ago. We took a Greek, trained him, sent him back, and gave them—Pericles. Later, when Europe needed a leader to stop the steady advance of the Mohammedan hordes, we kidnapped a young Frank nobleman entering military service, brought him to the future, trained him—and gave them — Charlemagne. Later, to spur navigation, we gave the world a future-trained Portuguese ruler with a love of the sea and a great desire to know what lay beyond it—Prince Henry the Navigator, you call him. Still later, a young English colonist who could lead his people against the tyranny of the crown overseas and through the first difficult years of their growth as a new nation—"

"Washington!" Harry cried.

"Yes, Washington. In every age we find the raw material that can save mankind—and train it."

The notion, so daring, so incredible, left Harry giddy and confused. "Then you . . . I . . . you think I . . ."

"Yes, Harry. I don't have to tell you that your own twentieth century is one of the sorest trouble spots of all. For the first time, man cannot only destroy his civilization, he can destroy himself completely—perhaps the whole Earth with him."

Harry shook his head.

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"Not if we're sitting here talking—two thousand years in the future."

Mara shrugged. "What is time, Harry? How do we know there are not many alternate paths? How do we know that humanity has not destroyed itself on the one path that matters? How do we not know that this talk between us, this love between us, this everything, will not be blotted out—unless the leader your world must have is not sent back to it in its time of troubles? How do we know that?"

Mara went on, staring intently at him: "Actually, that's the crux of the matter, Harry. There are some among us, calling themselves the non-interventionists, who believe that the world will work out its own destiny, who believe we shouldn't interfere. It's a constant battle here. They'd do anything to stop us. Anything. Not realizing that if they stop us they're liable to destroy not only a past civilization, but the whole future of mankind including themselves. Don't play God, they say—as if giving it a name matters when all humanity hangs in the balance," Mara said bitterly. "Well, I have told you enough. I have told you too much. I—"

"You mean, with the training you've given me, I'm supposed to go back there and . . . save the human race?"

Mara smiled, and kissed him lightly on the lips. "That's all right," she said. "I'm going with you. You won't be alone. You'll never be alone any more, Harry. If you want me."

He looked at her. He didn't have to say a word. It was in

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his eyes, what he felt for her. But then he said:

"Why me? Why was I picked for the job? What's so special about me, anyway?"

Mara smiled at him. "I think you're special," she said. "But of course that has nothing to do with it, Harry. We have machines for that. The machines don't make mistakes. You have the right personality, you will be in the right place, you will have the opportunity, you—"

"What is it? What must I do?"

Again Mara smiled. "Please, Harry. Please. It isn't one thing. It's years. Many years of leadership. The right leader in the right place at the right time—and, so experience has proved, with the right woman beside him. Now, please, Harry. I can tell you no more. The future will unfold. That is one thing the non-interventionists insist on. We can tell no more than we absolutely have to."

"But listen—"

"No. I have to go now." And Mara left him there, telling him she would see him tomorrow.

In a few minutes the stocky, intense Corsican entered the room. He grinned at Harry and in his broken English said, "That Josine. That girl . . . I luff her . . ."

"What did she tell you?"

"Tell me? Nothink. Nothink, American. What is there to tell a poor artillery officer of Brienne? What? Tell me that."

Harry looked at him, and slowly shook his head.

The next day Mara did not come. Neither did Josine.

Since this was the first time that had happened, Harry and the Corsican were immediately alarmed.

They did not come on the second day, either. Harry and the Corsican ate in the cafeteria with the other time-travelers, all of whom were getting ready to depart, their guides accompanying them, for their own periods of time. Aside from eating and exercising in the gym, there wasn't much for Harry and the Corsican to do. Their training was finished. Supposedly, they should have been preparing to return to their home ages.

But Mara and Josine had vanished.

On the third day, Harry and the Corsican went to see the Director of the training program. Although all their teachers had mentioned him,

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they had never seen him. The Director, they said, did his work and remained aloof. He would never consent to see the time-traveler from America and the time-traveler from Corsica.

The outer office was polished metal and bare, functional furniture. The receptionist was a cold-eyed blonde girl who was pretty but looked as if she hadn't smiled since the day she was born.

"Yes?"

"Our guides have disappeared," Harry said. "We want to find out why." The blonde just looked at him. Even to his own ears the words sounded strange.

"Surely you realize the Director will be too busy to—"

"We have plenty of time," Harry said. "We'll wait." He looked to his companion.

The Corsican nodded.

They waited all day, and the blonde didn't seem to care. The Director never came out. It was as if he were a part of whatever vast machinery kept the training program functioning. They took their meals separately. One of them was always there in the Director's anteroom.

"Doesn't he eat?" the Corsican asked. "Doesn't he sleep?"

The blonde said: "I told you you were wasting your time. He lives in there."

"Did you tell him we want to see him?"

The girl shrugged. "He won't see you."

On impulse Harry said: "If you ask me, your Director's behaving like a non-interventionist."

For the first time emotion showed on the blonde's face. It was gone almost before Harry could name it. Rage, he thought. Hatred.

"How dare you!" she said in a deadly voice. "You'd better get out of here—before I have you thrown out."

Harry looked at the Corsican. The Corsican smiled, grimly, with frustration but boldness. Harry felt that way too. They had absolutely nothing to lose. They could not yet realize the importance of the training program, to themselves or to mankind, but the Corsican loved Josine and Harry loved Mara.

"All right," Harry said. "Have us thrown out."

The blonde's hand pressed down on a section of her desk-top and in the wall behind her a door slid open. At first Harry thought it was the door to the Director's

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quarters, but then saw it was immediately adjacent to that. Three big men rushed into the room with small, unknown weapons gleaming in their fists.

"They insist on seeing the Director," the girl said. "They're time-travelers."

The big men stalked forward, apparently unwilling to use their weapons unless they had to. But Harry and the Corsican had been trained to fight men such as these. Harry hit one of them and saw him go down, dazed. Then another dove at Harry, jarring his midsection with a big, hard shoulder. Harry went over backwards and the blonde got up from her desk shouting.

For a while Harry was too busy struggling with the man who had driven him to the floor to see how the Corsican was faring. But slowly he got the upper hand, forcing the big guard over on his face and pulling his weapon arm up behind him in a hammerlock.

"Let go," Harry grated. "Let go—or I'll break it."

The guard's big hand opened, and Harry had a compact hand-gun in his fist. He stood up and swung around with it—in time to see the Corsican, grinning, get on his feet too.

"All right, the three of you," Harry said. "Back against that wall." He looked at the blonde girl. "You too, lady."

After they had done as Harry commanded, the Corsican smiled and said, "And now, my American friend?"

"You have one of the guns. Watch them. I'm going inside." He turned to the girl. "How do you open that door?"

She motioned with contempt toward her desk. "Third square," she said. "You press it."

"If this is some kind of trick—"

"If it is," the Corsican said, still smiling, "I shoot her."

Harry looked at the girl. "Well?"

"No. No trick."

"What about you people?" Harry said. "You're non-interventionists, aren't you?"

The girl cursed at him. The three guards said nothing. Harry took a deep breath and pressed the section of desk-top.

The door to the Director's quarters slid silently into the wall.

Quickly Harry ran down a passageway. When it reached

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a juncture with two other tunnels, an armed guard appeared.

"Out of the way," Harry cried, not stopping. "Emergency!"

The guard stood aside.

Harry selected the widest of the branching corridors, and sprinted down its length. After a while he reached a door. There was nothing else. The passageway led to the door, and ended there. Harry waited until his breathing became normal, then knocked quietly.

"Yes?" a voice on the other side of the door said.

"Emergency," Harry answered promptly. It had worked before. "The Director sent for me."

"Indeed?" the voice demanded softly.

Then the door slid open and a small man with a bald head and a weak chin but strong, deep-set eyes and a firm mouth stood there. "That's very interesting," he said. "You see, I am the Director."

He was pointing one of the hand weapons at Harry. "Now, what do you want?"

Harry tried to look beyond him into whatever was behind the doorway. He ignored the gun and said, "Josine and Mara."

"Now I recognize you. The American."

"Yes. If you're the Director, you were supposed to have been in charge of my training, to get me ready, to send me back with Mara—"

"That is the nature of my job, yes."

"And?"

"Well," the Director smiled. "Let us say there is a different opinion between the nature of the job and the current holder of the job."

"What you mean is you're a non-interventionist, is that right? But I don't get it. If you are, why didn't you bolix up the whole program? It would have been easy, quicker and more successful.

The Director smiled. Harry saw his finger tighten on the trigger of the hand weapon. A sudden leap? Was that the only chance he had? Futile chance . . .

"In the early nineteenth century," the Director said with abrupt and unexpected pedantry, "when the forces of nationalism, evil though they may be, were needed to mitigate the absolutism of an earlier age—that is one key to the course of civilization. In the later middle twentieth, when the forces of democracy were pitted against those

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of socialistic totalitarianism —that is another."

All at once Harry understood. If the Director could stop the Corsican and stop Harry, he would have balanced in the negative column all the positive work the interventionists had managed through five thousand years of history until Harry's time. Then they'd be starting with a fresh slate—possibly wiping out humanity in the process.

"You fool," Harry said. "Why don't you just send some hydrobombs back through time and get it over with?"

"But you don't understand. We are against intervention. We have nothing against your people."

"I came for Josine and Mara," Harry said. "Where are they?"

The Director smiled. "Being indoctrinated. You see, we non-interventionists can always use recruits—on the inside."

"Here?" Harry said. "They're here?"

"Inside. Of course. As you may have been told, I never leave this place. I'm supposed to be an utterly dedicated man whose work can go on uninterrupted. No one disturbs me. No one."

"And no one checks to see if you're doing what you're supposed to. Neat."

"I think so."

Harry said: "So neat, that you've never been able to check your data. The Corsican—what's his name?"

Smiling, the Director said, "Bonaparte. Why?"

"Jaques Bonaparte," Harry said with a grim smile. "The wrong Bonaparte. Someone's tricked you, or someone's made a mistake somewhere. The Bonaparte you want is Napoleon Bonaparte."

For a moment the Director looked confused. Although the identity of Jaques Bonaparte had always confused Harry too, that wasn't important right now. What was important was the fruits of his training. He had been taught to extricate himself from desperate situations. The Director and his staff had taught him. At a time like this—when all seemed lost—boldness. You acted with boldness, or didn't act.

Surprise stamped the Director's features. For a moment his eyes wavered.

And in that moment Harry struck.

The hand weapon hissed, firing a beam of energy at the ceiling above Harry's

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head as Harry grabbed the Director's wrist and forced him back over the threshold of the doorway. Then Harry jabbed two extended fingers at the Director's Adam's apple and, gagging, the bald man collapsed.

Harry took his weapon, shut the door, and called quickly: "Mara? Mara, where are you?"

No answer.

Harry looked at the Director, decided he would be out for at least a few minutes. Then he ran through a long chamber to a doorway and another passage.

He found Mara and Josine in a room at the end of the passage, each on a bed, each drugged into a deep sleep. And clamped on each of their heads was a set of earphones. Harry removed them and put one set to his own ears. A soothing voice told him, steadily, persuasively, unvaryingly, about non-interventionism. If you heard it constantly in a drugged stupor, if it pervaded your mind completely . . .

He flung the earphones away and ran back to the Director, who was just struggling to his feet. "Can you bring them around?" Harry demanded.

The Director didn't answer.

"If you can't you're going to die. Here and now."

Shrugging, the Director led the way back to the room where Mara and Josine were sleeping. While Harry watched him he injected something into their arms. In a little while they stirred. Then Mara sat up.

She smiled weakly. "Harry. It's you."

"Can you walk?"

"I—I can try."

She got to her feet, swaying. Josine did so also.

"Let's get back," Harry said.

Together they went back to the waiting room, where the blonde and the three big guards were being watched by Jaques Bonaparte. Not Napoleon, Harry thought. Jaques. An unknown Bonaparte. Why? It didn't make sense.

The Corsican heard them coming, and looked in their direction for a moment. "Josine . . ." he breathed.

Suddenly the blonde receptionist's right hand flashed. In the moment that the Corsican's attention wavered, she reached for a tiny hand weapon.

She fired it.

A small red spot appeared

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between the Corsican's eyes. It was a hole—in skin and flesh. The raw charge of energy would leave a similar hole in the back of his skull. Instinctively he reached up, as if to brush away the death which had so suddenly entered his head. Then he fell.

Harry shot the blonde girl's gunhand.

Mara, who had apparently recovered, rushed to her and took her weapon, swinging around to face the guards. "All right, now hold still," he said.

Josine went to Jaques Bonaparte, cradling his head in her arms. "Jaques," she cried. "Jaques, oh, Jaques."

It was Harry who, at Mara's instructions, called for the police. They could handle it now.

Two weeks later, they were ready to leave. Josine would return alone to Jaques Bonaparte's age, searching for a man who could take his place. At least that cleared up one mystery for Harry. Jaques Bonaparte was dead. His sad teacher and lover Josine would go back searching for a substitute. Already she had told the others that Jaques had a brother, a youngster named Napoleon, who also wanted to enter the military school at Brienne.

Of course, under Napoleon instead of Jaques Bonaparte, the seeds of nationalism would be sown too deeply, but perhaps even that would be better than the absolutism, which preceded it.

"And the Director?" Harry asked Mara.

"He'll be reconditioned. We don't waste manpower here."

Harry didn't say anything. It suddenly occurred to him that in nineteenth century France Josine would be called Josephine.

Then Harry asked: "What about us?"

"You're going back. I'll meet you there. You won't remember—but your subconscious will."

"What am I going to do?"

"I can't tell you—but you'll do it."

They led him to a machine. He sat down. Something whirred and whistled and roared through his being . . .

". . . easy now, soldier," someone said.

Harry stood up.

"Must've been the heat," he said. "It wasn't the needle. I'm not afraid of the needle."

"That's all right, soldier."

He had been taken to a little rest room in the Medi-

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cal Center at Camp Kilmer. There was a newspaper on the desk. He saw the headlines. Trouble in the Middle East. Trouble in Eastern Europe. War clouds threatening in the Far East. It was a grim world, about to explode . . .

A Wac offered him a cup of coffee. She was very beautiful, too beautiful for a Wac. She looked familiar.

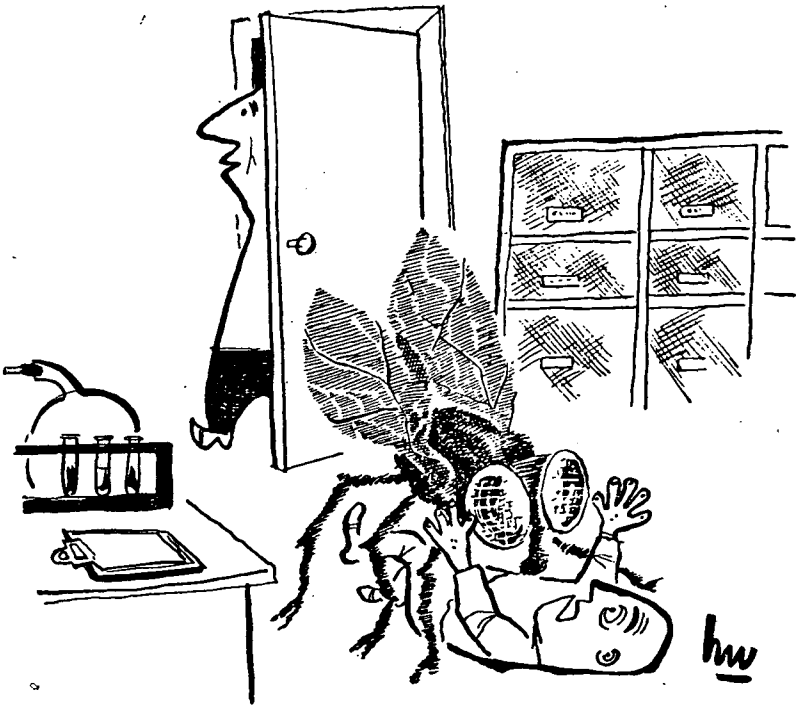
"Where do I know you from?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. I'm Marilyn."

Marilyn. Her name. Even her name was almost right. Where . . . where?

War clouds threatening.

It came to Harry somehow, he did not know why, that he had a great future. Marilyn took his hand. **THE END**



"Dr. Ramsey, how are the new hormone tests coming?"

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No Room In Heaven

By O. H. LESLIE

Scientific investigation is a worthy pursuit of course. Even the investigation of Heaven itself. So we can't blame these scientists for sending an investigator. But heaven help the poor fellow they sent!

EVEN his last thought was detached and scientific.

He observed it all. The sudden thin white vein in the beaker. The purple, angry froth. The flare of blinding light, the hollow boom of exploding chemicals.

And that was the way he died, in a laboratory after working hours, with fragments of a shattered beaker still in his hand.

He opened his eyes and found a bird on his shoulder.

It was a small, many-colored bird. When he lifted himself from the soft ground, it was startled, and flew away into the bright sky.

He watched its flight, feeling a pleasant lassitude. He yawned and stretched, and scratched his chest languidly. The silky, flowing robe that covered him felt cool against his skin.

A rabbit bounded out in front of him, stopped short, wheeled comically, and bounded off in another direction. A smaller bunny leaped after it. He found himself chuckling quietly, then laughing aloud, uproariously, at this little chase, this beautiful, sun-brilliant day, this glorious magic of being alive.

Alive?

He seemed to hear a voice, distant and musical. He spun about. There was no one in sight.

"Who's there?" he said.

No answer came. All he could hear were peaceful, pastoral sounds: the burbling conversation of far-off waters, rustled leaves, the

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tender noises of little animals.

Behind him, in the lush green branches of a majestic tree, a robin voiced a sudden inspiration.

Unconsciously, tears came to his eyes, an accompaniment of stillness in his breast. From somewhere, lilting harp-like notes of song, a woman's voice joined the robin's chorus.

He sank to his knees.

"It's Heaven!" he said.

On the green grass carpet, he sobbed freely and happily.

Later, he found an orchard.

When he had dined gratefully on the succulent fruit, he stretched out beneath a heavy-burdened peach tree and dozed peacefully. His dreams were troubled, but their memory vanished quickly when he awoke. The sun still shone overhead, but the blue had deepened into an azure hue that thrilled him. A formation of geese honked its way across the sky, and small furry animals gamboled unafraid over the grassy hills and plains, in and out of picturesque wooded groves. Crystal-clear streams bubbled here and there; within a mile or so he could see a valley, with an ovoid lake lying on the bottom like the mirror of a lovely woman.

"It is beautiful," said a voice.

He looked up, unsurprised, smiling.

She wasn't beautiful, but her skin was pearly, translucent. Her brown hair was as polished clean as the lake in the valley, and fell behind her shoulders in a breathtaking cascade.

"You won't miss anything of that other world," she said. "Not after awhile. What's your name?"

"Raven," he said, recalling it for the first time.

"I am Lily."

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

He saw now that she carried a bouquet of many flowers in her hands. "Look!" she cried delightedly. "Marigolds. Azaleas. Zinnias! A beautiful pink dahlia. And roses—oh, lovely roses!"

He looked at her, her face radiant in the frame of floral colors. But then a more spectacular display took his attention.

"The sunset!" he almost shouted. "Look—"

The girl drew in her breath sharply. Together, they gazed at the swirling,

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His trip into the hereafter was sudden and violent.

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fiery, orange and blue patterns, moving with unearthly speed and glory across the horizon.

"And soon," said the girl reverently, "the Sleep comes, and the Dawn."

"Sleep?" Raven laughed. "Not for me! I've done with sleeping for today!"

"You'll see," said Lily with a mysterious smile. "After the sunset comes the Sleep. It is the Way. It was always the Way."

Raven laughed again, but this time because he knew the girl was right. Torpor filled his limbs, and dragged at his eyelids. He yawned magnificently.

Lily had stretched herself on the ground, her eyes already closed.

"You're right," said Raven, smiling sleepily. "But tomorrow's another day!"

When he awoke, Lily was gone, but all else was the same. The birds arched swiftly overhead, the streams rippled just as softly, invitingly. The air was pleasantly warm and flower-fragrant. But he knew that something was wrong.

He had a headache.

He searched his mind for the reason. He tried to probe back into the memories of his dreams. But with each waking moment, those dreams receded far back into the unreachable corridor of the subconscious.

But he definitely, painfully, annoyingly, had a headache.

He heard the sound of laughter. He rose to his feet and walked towards it, enjoying the feel of the luxurious grass between his toes. When he finally came to its source, he paused a moment to appraise the poetry of Lily's graceful movements as she chased a snow-white puppy across the fields. She stopped when she saw Raven, and the puppy, disappointed, worried her bare feet with his young teeth.

"Hello!" she called gaily, the laughter still on her face.

When he came up to her, she surprised him by flinging her arms around his neck.

"I'm so glad to see you!"

"I'm glad to see you." He blushed, and disengaged her arms.

She led him to the comfortable shade of a great elm, not twenty paces from a lawn that fronted an alabaster building of chaste white simplicity. There was one door, seemingly carved into the stone, but no visible windows. Raven was curious,

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but Lily's curiosity about himself was more demanding.

"I know!" she said, plucking at a falling leaf. "You were a hunter, a bold hunter, with a falcon on your wrist."

Raven laughed, his eyes caught by hers, held by their happiness and directness.

"Or a teacher. Tutoring young children in mathematics. Or a ballad singer. Or maybe a bad painter. Or a poet!" She clapped her hands, delighted with her own invention.

"No, you're wrong," Raven said, sharing her laughter. "I wasn't anything of the sort. I was—" He stopped. The headache, momentarily forgotten, now hammered its presence. "I was—none of those—" He couldn't go on.

Suddenly, Lily's laughter was stilled. Her face grew serious. Her hand reached out and touched his arm gently and with understanding.

"But Raven," she said. "I don't expect you to *know*."

He looked at her blankly.

"Nobody really knows," she said softly. "You can't. It isn't the Way."

He stood up, unsteadily.

"Nobody can know who or what they were—before," Lily went on. Nobody wants to know. You won't either—you'll see."

"But, I—"

"Don't." Lily rose and put her arms around his chest, and this time, he let them enfold him. "It's only my silly game. Anything that happened — before — why, it doesn't matter any more. Not at all. Don't you understand?"

Raven felt the sting of approaching tears. Ashamed, he broke away and turned his back to the girl.

"Don't be sad," said Lily, coming towards him. "It's just the Way."

With a sweep of his arm, Raven wiped away the moisture from his eyes. Suddenly, the pain in his head seemed to lighten. He turned and put his hands on the girl's bare arms. "Of course," he said. "It's the Way, and that's all there is. I'm being stupid. It takes a while—to understand."

Lily said, "Understanding comes easy here."

Raven smiled at her again. Then he laughed.

"What became of our puppy?"

A dozen days passed—or a hundred. There was no counting.

The sun rose and set in a drama that never lost its thrill to Raven. Rose and set,

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dawn into dusk—a world, a wonder, a happiness without end. They played, they laughed, they danced; Lily picked her bouquets and never ceased to marvel at their splendor; he joined her in wondrous games in which all creation was the playing field; he listened to marvelous music which seemed to come from every tree and blade of grass. His beard grew long and rich and full, and amazingly (for Raven was dark) gleaming with golden highlights.

This was joy, eternal bliss, ecstacy. This was Heaven!

One day, he asked Lily about the white building.

"It is just there," she said vaguely.

"There for what?"

"I don't know. Look," she said, displaying a tiara of daffodils. "Isn't it pretty?"

"It has a door," he persisted. "What can it be for?"

"No one knows or cares, my blackbird," she answered, placing the tiara on his head. "My, what a crown! I name you Prince Golden Beard!"

"Lily, be serious!" he said.

"Why?"

"Aren't you at all curious?"

"No. Why should I be? Oh, come Raven—let's go to the lake."

"Not now. I'd like to visit the building again. Just for a little while."

"But you've been to the building. It may be just a monument—a landmark for Them."

"For who?"

"The Angels, silly. The guardians. When they fly over us, they need landmarks, I suppose."

"Have you ever seen the Angels?"

Lily's brow puckered in thought. "Not for many sunsets. But they'll be back. They are our guardians."

Raven laughed. "I always thought the guardians of Heaven were the United States Marines."

"The *what?*"

"The Marines." Raven's vision suddenly blurred. He put his head against a tree to steady himself.

"What do you mean, Raven?"

"I—don't know." He put his hand to his eyes. The headache he had once known seemed to be returning, but he concealed his pain from the girl. "It just came into my thoughts. I don't know what it means."

"You're so strange sometimes, Raven. But come on—let's swim before the sunset!"

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"Swim." Raven shook himself back into focus. "Yes. That's a good idea."

The next morning, upon awakening, Raven found that he could remember a dream.

He had dreamed that he had climbed the tallest tree of Heaven, and had seen dark clouds approaching. As the clouds came closer, he realized that it was an armada of black angels. They circled above him as he climbed back to the ground in the grip of terror. Then one of the grim angels swooped down and landed at his feet, and with a smile diabolic for such a heavenly messenger, the black figure spoke to him and said:

"Lazarus!"

Even now, in the soul-comforting light he knew as Heaven's Dawn, Raven could hear the black angel's evil laugh as he flew out of his dream.

Every detail of that terrible nightmare remained in his memory, and the fear it inspired remained, too. And with the fear, there came a resolve.

"Lily, what do you think is over there?"

Raven pointed into the distance, beyond the valley of the lake.

"Heaven," said Lily. "More Heaven. Just more of the same, you silly blackbird!"

"Do you know that for sure?"

"What else could there be?" She looked at him innocently.

"I don't know. But I'd like to find out. I *have* to find out."

"You're talking so strangely again, Raven. Why must you find out?"

"I don't know. I feel—restless."

"Maybe you were that bold explorer after all." She tried to change his mood with a laugh. But there was a new thought in Raven's mind.

"Lily," he asked, "where is God?"

"What?"

"Where is He? I want to see Him! This is Heaven—so I want to see God!"

"Raven, don't say such things—" Now there was concern in Lily's voice.

"He may be over there," said Raven, his eyes bright, "and then he may not. But I want to find out, do you understand? I can't help myself. I have to *know!*"

"But it isn't the Way," Lily whispered.

When the next Sleep was over, Raven awoke still re-

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solved. Lily was as yet stretching herself awake, her brown hair tumbled about her face. Raven looked at her tenderly. For a moment, his determination weakened at the sight.

"Why?" he asked himself. "Why go?"

Then he knew. "Lazarus," he said aloud.

Raven turned and started for the valley.

He walked and walked. When he was hungry, he plucked the plump fruit from the branches. When he was tired, he stretched out on the grass and gazed at the bright and friendly sky. He walked until the lake was out of sight, until the gentle, familiar sounds he knew faded out of hearing. He walked until he fell exhausted, waiting for the sunset, and the Sleep.

For three sunrises and sunsets he walked before he noticed any difference in the terrain.

Now there seemed to be fewer brooks, and birds, and flowers. The woods became denser, the grass wilder in his path, the rocks and stones cruder than the polished specimens of the terrain he left behind. And most disturbing of all, there seemed to be fewer fruit-heavy trees to satisfy his growing hunger. Aware of the shortage, he stopped to weave himself an awkward basket of vines, and filled it with fruit as he proceeded on his way. But in time, that supply was depleted, too—and the fruit trees were no longer to be found.

Hunger became a problem, but luck was with him. He startled a squirrel, and the animal scampered into a hole in a tree. Raven reached in after him, and after sustaining a few small bites, managed to locate the squirrel's cache of nuts.

Then a new problem arose. As dusk came on the fifth day of his journey, he discovered with amazement that he was cold.

As the sun began its spectacular descent, the chill was even more apparent, and Raven found himself shivering, praying for the Sleep to come.

But this night, there was no Sleep.

Raven covered himself with leaves, but the blanket was poor protection against the increasing chill. Trembling with both fear and cold, he lay wide-eyed, listening. The night was haunted by strange sounds and sud-

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den, staring eyes; flashes of mysterious fire and unnerving snaps of twigs. It was his first unsleeping night in Heaven, a night of bright moonlight and a sky like a jeweler's tray, a night of beauty and indefinable terror.

Then he saw the Angel.

It was flying high, moving among the stars, a whirring speck, bright as the moonlight.

In a shower of leaves, Raven sat up, his heart pounding.

The Angel was coming closer. It was coming down, not more than a mile from Raven's encampment.

The excitement sent heat through Raven's veins. Forgetting the numbing cold and oppressive night, he started running to the Angel's landing place.

In the dark, pebbles became daggers beneath his feet; trees became fortress walls. The soles of his feet were cracked and bleeding, every exposed area of skin was scratched and red before he approached the clearing where the Angel had descended. Breathing heavily, struggling to silence his drumming body, he fell against a giant oak that stood like a great pillar before the arena of grass. And in the center of the arena, Raven saw the Angel.

It was white, graceful, delicate of limb.

Its shape, though pleasing, was meaningless to Raven.

It was beautiful, and frightening.

His eyes were so busy absorbing the wonder of this heavenly guardian that Raven failed to see the man walking towards it. He heard him first, the voice cracking like a whip in the stillness:

"He was somewhere over there!"

The man was pointing in his direction. He wore, instead of a robe, shirt and trousers. An odd, peaked cap was on his head. Besides the form of the white Angel, he looked small.

Another sharp voice rang out, this time from the Angel itself.

"Well, let's find him!"

Raven trembled violently. He saw the jaws of the Angel part, and from its mouth, another man emerged. And still another voice, deep within Raven's mind, told him the truth of this awesome scene. The white form was no Angel. It was a flying machine!

Almost shrieking with the impact of this suddenly-re-

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vealed mystery, Raven turned and blundered his way back into the forest. A quiescent owl awoke with a start, screamed horribly and flew full into his face. He battered at the bird with his hands and was raked across the forehead by its flailing claws. He stumbled, slipped, fell, scrambled back to his feet, and ran like a charging elephant away from the scene. The trees seemed to drop thorny nets in his path, but he crashed through them all. Sleeping birds awoke angrily and screamed their resentment in a hundred terrible voices. Finally, exhausted by the staggering pace, Raven halted, gasped, and stumbled forward into the waiting arms of unconsciousness.

Water, cool on his forehead, brought him awake.

"Oh, Raven!"

It was Lily.

"How—how did you find me? Where are we?"

"I don't know. Somewhere. Beyond the valley."

He saw the sun had risen. He grasped the girl's hands and kissed them feverishly. "Lily! Lily!"

"Raven, I'm so frightened. When you went away, I couldn't bear the thought that you might not return. So I followed you—"

Raven sat up. He touched his aching forehead and felt the blood on it. "You shouldn't have—"

"But this is Heaven, Raven. We're to be happy in Heaven. But I couldn't have been happy without—" She paused.

Raven got to his feet.

"Lily," he said, "there are no Angels. Not here."

She looked at him vacantly. "Raven, you're not well."

"I didn't sleep last night,

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Lily. Do you know what that means? The Sleep didn't take me last night. And I saw one of the Angels. It landed not far from me. I went to it. I saw it."

"Raven, don't talk that way!"

"I tell you it's true! Your 'Angels' are flying machines, Lily! Flying machines made by men! Lily—

"This isn't Heaven!"

Lily put her hands to her ears. "Raven, stop!"

"Listen to me, Lily. Do you remember anything—before?"

"No—nothing!" Her face was screwed with the pain of this argument.

"Do you remember—dying?"

"No! Yes! Oh, I'm not sure, Raven!"

"It's important, Lily. Try and believe me!"

"I remember — something. Something terrible." She looked away from him, her voice quavering. "A man. A black hat. Oh, Raven—please don't make me go on!" Now she was crying, profuse, bitter tears.

"You must!"

"A black hat. I remember that. He was wearing it, pulled down over his face. I couldn't see his face—I didn't want to—"

Her voice grew shrill. "Lily, please!" Raven gripped her arm.

"The man was smiling. He was horrible. He said something to me. I couldn't answer. I gave him something. I know!" She extended her white wrist. "My watch. I gave him my watch.

"Now leave me alone! Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

Lily screamed. She tore herself from Raven's grasp and ran wildly from him. Then she fell, and lay sobbing, her shoulders heaving.

Raven went to her.

"Wait, Mr. Raven."

He turned.

It was a man, in khaki shirt and trousers, with an odd peaked cap on his head. He was pointing a rifle.

Raven's next impressions were blurred into a sequence of strange and hurried events. The apparition he faced held him rooted, while the gentle whirring sound he had heard the night before returned. The "Angel" appeared over them, and landed softly on the grass, its whirling blades still rotating slowly. Commands were shouted, and numbly, Raven climbed aboard. The man in the peaked cap proffered a

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helping arm and kindly encouragement. But as quickly as Raven warmed to the kindness, another arm slithered about his neck, and a large hand pressed something soft and wet against his face.

His last thought was of Lily.

He opened his eyes when consciousness returned, but a sense of danger warned him to close them again and feign sleep.

He was aware of dim light through his eyelids, and cool smooth fabric over his body. In the self-created darkness, he listened for identifiable sounds, but heard only the play of wind and leaves. Then came footsteps, and the voices of two men near his bed.

"What have they decided?" one said.

"They're still in conference," said the other.

"Feldmann wants to go whole hog," said the first. "He wants to tell him everything. I don't know, though. It's only three months."

"Yes. But Feldmann thinks this case is different. Well, I've got some work to do."

Raven felt his arm being touched, and his muscles stiffened unwillingly. Grimly, he kept still, even when he realized that the man was pushing a needle into his flesh.

When he came to again, he opened his eyes and kept them open. A man's face was not three feet from his. It was a broad, open face, large-featured, and unshaven. The eyes were sleepy, but the mouth was firm and determined. Then the man spoke:

"Do you know your name?"

Raven stared at the moving lips. Then he replied. "Raven."

The man leaned back, and Raven quickly appraised his surroundings. It was a small bare room, and he was lying in a narrow bed. There was a strange, medicinal smell that Raven felt was oddly familiar.

The man spoke again.

"Did you ever hear the name Hughes?"

Raven thought hard. "Yes. Someplace. I can't remember where."

"How about Conroy?"

"Yes. Someplace."

"How about Davidson? Lattimore? Grosbeck? Feldmann?"

"Yes," said Raven. "That last one is familiar. Feldmann."

"Who is Feldmann?" said the man.

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Raven shook his head. "I don't know. It's just a name, but it's familiar—somehow."

The door opened, and Raven turned to see the man of the peaked hat enter the room. There was a brief whispered conference. When it was over, the questioner turned to Raven again, his mouth set more grimly than before.

"All right," he said. "Raven, are you awake? Try this one. *Lazarus.*"

Raven stared. He searched the open, anxious face, and felt the warmth of familiarity flood over him like a gently-breaking wave.

He sighed, so deeply it was almost a moan of pain.

"Lazarus," he repeated. "Project Lazarus."

Raven smiled. The big man, whose name was Feldmann, tried to smile back, but his face was too busy with other emotions. He stood up, and took Raven's wrist in his thick hand. There was no resistance as he folded the arm over Raven's chest and said:

"Now you get some sleep."

Three days later, Feldmann reappeared, this time clean-shaven, fresh-shirted, and smiling. Raven was sitting up by then, his mind clearer, his memory stirring.

"You might say that Project Lazarus started in Russia," Feldmann was saying. "We are certain, at any rate, that a Russian made the greatest contribution towards getting it off the ground. His name was Zoblodofsky, and he defected to us in 1959. Is his name familiar?"

"Vaguely," said Raven.

"Well, Zoblodofsky was a man without friends on both sides of the Curtain. During World War II, he was the scientist who conducted certain experiments on the battlefields of Stalingrad that earned him the American newspaper nickname of 'The Ghoul.' Do you remember that?"

"Yes. Yes." Raven hitched himself up further on the pillows. "Resuscitation. Revival experiments."

"That was it," said Feldmann. "Zoblodofsky thought he could—within reason—bring the dead back to life."

Feldmann paused. Raven lifted his hands and stared at them curiously, turning them around and around, studying his fingers.

"We doubt that he ever succeeded," Feldmann continued, "although Zoblodofsky claimed two or three complete revivals. There was no way of telling, of course,

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whether they were soldiers brought back from the brink —with heart massage, and so forth—or genuine examples of 'dead men come back.'

"Nevertheless, his work made decided progress, and when he arrived in America, he continued his studies despite much adverse publicity. He worked alone and in secret, and willed all his notes to his son. His son continued the experiments after his father's death, until 1974 when he was arrested for—well, we have microfilms of the newspapers of that period, and you can go through those at your leisure.

"At any rate, Project Lazarus wasn't actually christened until some forty years later, when a documentation of the Zoblodofsky experiments was made by two young bio-physicists named Hughes and Conroy. They published a tome under that title in 2015, and managed to interest quite a few scientists. Specifically, scientists named Davidson, Grosbeck, Lattimore, and a promising young fellow named Leonard Raven."

Raven grinned at him. "And somebody named Feldmann, too."

"Yes." Feldmann stood up and walked to the window.

"Only two of that original group are alive and well," he said quietly. "Davidson is dead. Grosbeck and Lattimore are with us, but just as truly dead—soulless, mindless, pitiful creatures."

He spoke darkly, with great bitterness. But as he turned to face Raven again, Feldmann's face brightened.

"But Len Raven is alive, and well, and sane. And that means Project Lazarus is a success. Do you understand that, Len? More than half a century of work and persecution and failure. *But now we've succeeded!*"

"But where was I?" asked Leonard Raven.

"In Heaven. But not the Heaven of the Bible's promise. A Heaven here on earth, Len, made by the hand of man."

"It was—beautiful."

"It should be. It's America's largest private estate, a billion-dollar paradise where even the weather is created to suit the will of its owner. And its owner is a man rich enough to buy anything in this world—except life."

Raven looked up. "Calvin Oates—"

"He volunteered his estate, with all its fantastic equipment, and all the money we

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would need for its upkeep, in exchange for the one commodity that wasn't for sale anywhere else. Calvin Oates is eighty-four years old, and frankly, we never believed for a minute that Project Lazarus could give him new life after death."

"But you took the estate."

"We told him nothing but the truth. We told him that all our experiments to date had been failures. Yes, even though we were able to bring Grosbeck and Lattimore back to some sort of life. We told him that he could expect nothing more than living death—but he was willing to take the gamble. He had nothing to lose. We had everything to gain."

"But why—heaven?"

"It started as a crazy suggestion," said Feldmann. "You might even say it was a joke, an idle remark, a wild thought. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start with Lattimore.

"Lattimore was the thirty-fourth experiment. Of course, we never asked our group to sacrifice their lives in the tests. All our studies had been made with recently deceased—heart failures, accidents, even murders. And believe me—those medical students seeking bodies for dissection and autopsy in the nineteenth century had an easy time compared to us! Yet we were offering life!

"At any rate." Feldmann brushed a small river of sweat from his forehead. "At any rate, our first twenty-five experiments had been total failures. Our twenty-sixth was our first so-called 'success.' I will never forget that day. It was a young boy, a bicyclist named Adams who had run into an auto. We went through forty hours of treatment, replacing the damaged tissue, repairing the heart, a dozen different and complex techniques. This is no simple process! As I say, it took us forty hours, but at the end of that time, the boy stirred. I tell you, my own heart stopped when I saw that young lip tremble."

Feldmann paused, and his hand gripped the railing of the bed. He swayed dizzily, as he might have on that fateful day.

"When the boy's eyes opened, I could have shouted like Stentor to the world. I wanted to scream and laugh and shout at people in the street. But it was short-lived elation. The eyes opened—and stared."

Feldmann sat down.

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"The boy is still alive. But he hasn't stopped staring."

Raven waited until the other man assumed control of his feelings. "What happened?" he asked softly.

"Call it what you will. Madness. Catalepsy. Emptiness. Nothingness."

Feldmann stood up and began his restless pacing.

"It was *shock!*" he said savagely, pounding his fist into his palm. "A strange, terrible shock. The shock of dying, of coming back to life. It was too much for his mind —too much, we found, for any mind.

"We never failed an experiment after that. We had the key. We had the methods. But all we could produce were living dead men—men whose mortal minds could not bridge the gap between —over there, and here."

"Lattimore?" said Raven.

"When Grosbeck and Lattimore died, we experimented with them. All of us have signed a pledge willing our bodies to the Project. Grosbeck died in a motorboat accident on Lake Michigan. Lattimore died of more natural cause—he was eighty-one, if you remember. Both are with us again, but are walked and fed like infants.

"*Shock!*" Feldmann's pounding fist shook the tears out of his eyes. "We had to find a way. We studied the problem frantically, tried everything, thought of everything.

"Then, one day, a small miracle happened. A young fellow, a serious, sober fellow, had a wild thought, a crazy idea, based on childhood dreams, and faith, and the lessons of his parents."

"It was me, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Len. It was you. We talked about it together, remember? Half-seriously, half-joking. We talked about religion, and science, of facts and of belief. We talked about Heaven, Len, you and I."

"Yes," Raven said. "I remember it now."

"We talked about Heaven, and we wondered. What would happen if our dead men awoke where they belonged? Remember how we wondered? Half-seriously—and then, desperately serious, willing to try anything. How strong was faith? Strong enough to bridge the gap? Stronger than shock? Stronger than insanity?

"We had a hard time with that one, Len. Even our own colleagues. We knew how Zoblodofsky felt, didn't we? Prophets without honor! But

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you've been to Heaven, Len. And now you're back on earth."

Feldmann smiled, "Maybe there wasn't any room up there!"

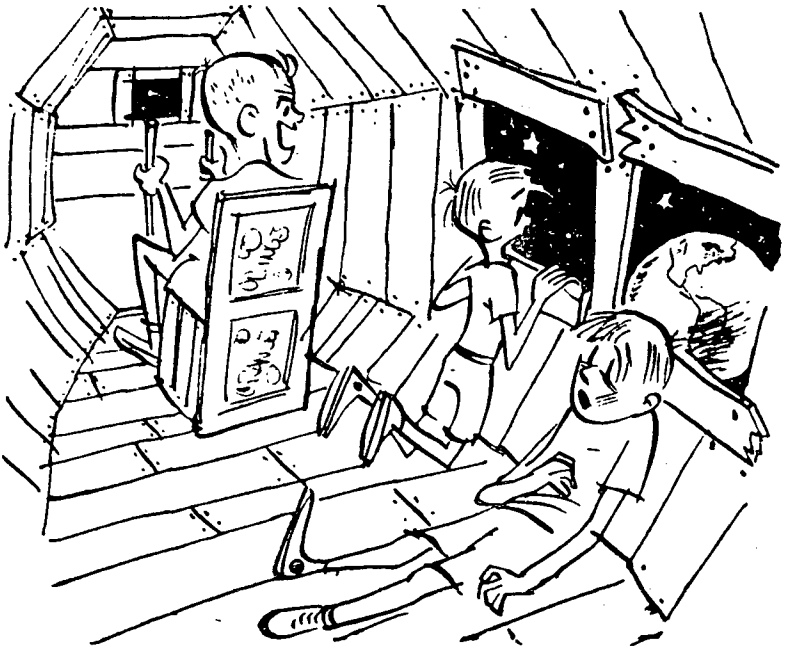
The silvery-white helicopter landed lightly on the velvety grass. Raven stepped out, and watched anxiously as the brown-haired girl came running towards him.

"Raven!"

"Lily!"

They embraced, and kissed. "Raven—" He put his hand over her mouth. "Don't say anything yet. I want you to come with me. I want to tell you something."

THE END



"Wassa matter, didn't ya think it would work?"

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The QUANTUM JUMP

By ROBERT WICKS

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

Captain Brandon was a pioneer. He explored the far reaches of space and reported back on how things were out there. So it was pretty disquieting to find out that the "far reaches of space" knew more about what went on at home than he did.

BRANDON was looking at the Milky Way. Through his permaglas canopy, he could see it trailing across the black velvet of space like a white bridal veil. Below his SC9B scout-ship stretched the red dust deserts of Sirius Three illuminated by the thin light of two ice moons. He looked at the Milky Way.

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He looked at it as a man looks at a flickering fireplace and thinks of other things. He thought of the sun, 52 trillion miles away, a pinpoint of light lost in the dazzle of the Milky Way—the Earth a speck of dust in orbit just as this planet was to its master, Sirius.

Nine light years away. Of course, thirteen years had passed on Earth since they had left, because the trip took four years by RT—relative time. But even four years is a long time to be shut up in Astro One with five other men, especially when one of them was the imperious Colonel Towers.

"A quantum jump—that's the way to beat the Reds," the colonel had said a thousand times. His well-worn expression had nothing to do with quantum mechanics—the actual change in atomic configuration due to the application of sufficient energy. Rather, it was a slang expression referring to a major advance in inter-planetary travel due to a maximum scientific and technological effort.

"Let 'em have Mars and Venus," the colonel would say—"Let 'em have the whole damn Solar System! We'll make a quantum jump—leap-frog ahead of 'em. We'll be the first men to set foot on a planet of another solar system."

Four years had gone by in the ship; thirteen years on Earth. Four years of Colonel Towers. Military discipline grew more strict each day. Space does funny things to some men. The "we'll be the first men" had turned into, "*I'll* be the first *man*."

But it was Captain Brandon who drew the assignment of scouting Sirius Three for a suitable landing place for Astro, of sampling its atmosphere and observing meteorlogical conditions. Even as Brandon climbed into the scout-ship, Towers had cautioned him.

"Remember, your assignment is to locate a firm landing site with ample protection from the elements. Under no circumstances are you to land yourself. Is that clearly understood?"

Brandon nodded, was launched and now was cruising one hundred thousand feet above the alien planet.

Brandon tilted the ship up on one wing and glanced down at the brick-red expanse of desert. Tiny red mists marked dust storms. Certainly this was no place to set down the full weight of Astro nor to protect the crew and equipment from abrasive dust.

He righted the ship. Far on the horizon was a bank of atmospheric clouds. Perhaps conditions were more promising there. He shoved the power setting to 90 per cent.

A fire warning indicator light blinked on. Instantly Brandon's eyes were on the instrument panel. The tailpipe temperature seemed all right. It could be a false indication. He eased back

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on the power setting. Maybe the light would go out. But it didn't. Instead he felt a surging rumble deep in the bowels of the ship. Luminous needles danced and a second red light flashed on.

He snapped the vidio switch and depressed the mike button.

"Astro One, this is Brandon. Over."

A steady crackling sound filled his earphones; a grid of light and shadow fluttered on the screen. A thought entered his mind. Maybe he had put too much planet curvature between Astro and himself.

"Astro One, this is Brandon. Come in, please."

A series of muffled explosions rocked the ship. He chopped the power back all the way and listened intently.

"May Day! May Day! Astro, this is Brandon. May Day!"

A faint voice sputtered in his ear, the face of Reinhardt, the radioman appeared before him. "Brandon, this is Astro One. What is your position? Over."

Brandon's voice sounded strange and distant as he talked to his oxygen mask. "Heading—one - eight - zero. Approximately six hundred miles from you. Altitude one hundred thousand feet."

"What is the nature of your trouble, Brandon?"

Before Brandon could answer, the face of Colonel Towers appeared beside the radioman's.

"Brandon, what're you trying to pull?"

"Engine trouble, sir. Losing altitude fast."

"Do you know the nature of the trouble?"

"Negative. Might have thrown a compressor blade. Got a fire indication, then a compressor surge. Chopped off the power."

Towers frowned. "Why didn't you use straight rocket power?"

"Well, sir—"

"Never mind now. You may have encountered oxygen or hydrogen - rich atmosphere — melted your compressor blades. Try an air start on straight rocket. I want that ship back, Brandon. Repeat, I want that ship back!"

"I may be able to ride it down. Get it on the deck intact."

"Try an air start, Brandon." Towers leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Brandon. "I don't want you to set foot on that planet, get me?"

But there wasn't time to try anything. The cabin was filling with fumes. Brandon looked down. A fringe of blue flame crept along between the floor and the bottom of the pilot's capsule. A cold ache filled the cavity of his stomach.

"Too late. I'm on fire! Capsuling out. Repeat, capsuling out."

"Brandon—!"

The colonel's glaring face flicked off as Brandon pushed the pre-ejection lever into the lock position severing all connections between the ship and the pilot's capsule. Brandon had a strange, detached feeling as he pushed the ejection button.

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There was an explosion and the pilot's capsule shot up like a wet bar of soap squeezed out of a giant's hand.

The ship turned into a torch and sank beneath him. Brandon closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them he was staring at the Milky Way, then the desert as he tumbled over and over. He talked to the Milky Way.

"Ten seconds. Should wait at least ten seconds before releasing the drogue chute so I'll clear the ship." Then he spoke to the desert. "And maybe another ten to give the capsule time to slow down."

He counted then pulled the chute release. Nylon streamed out behind him and snapped open with a tremendous jar. A moment later, bundles of metal ribbons floated out and billowed into a giant umbrella. The last thing he remembered was the taste of blood on his lips.

When Brandon opened his eyes he was staring at the silvery disks of the twin moons. They were high in the sky, obscuring the center of the Milky Way. Funny he should be lying on his back looking at the sky, he thought. Then he remembered.

The capsule was on its back and Brandon was still strapped securely to the seat. His whole body ached. Tendons had been pulled, muscles strained from the force of the ejection. His oxygen mask was still in place, but his helmet hung partly loose. He adjusted it automatically, then unbuckled the seat straps. He took a deep breath. Under the oxygen mask, he was aware of dried blood clotted in his nostrils, caked around the corners of his lips.

With an effort he sat up on the seat back and looked through the perma-glas. A tangle of cords stretched out to the nylon of the main chute draped over a dust dune. Beyond it he could see the gleaming metal ribbons of the drogue chute.

Ahead of him, behind some low hills, he could see a dull red glow. The ship, he thought. Astro may already be hovering over it.

He dragged the survival kit from behind the seat and pulled out some rations, a first-aid kit, finally a tele-talkie. Raising the antenna, he plugged in the mike cord from his mask and held down the "talk" key with his thumb.

"Astro One, this is Brandon. Come in."

As he talked a picture flickered on the screen. It was the radio room on Astro One. Colonel Towers was pacing back and forth in front of the radioman.

"Shall I keep trying to raise him?" he heard Reinhardt ask.

"Damn fool stunt," Towers sputtered. "Know what I think? I think he went down deliberately. Just to be the first human being to walk the ground of a planet of another solar system."

"Astro, this is Brandon. Come in please."

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Towers continued to pace and talk. "He did it to spite me."

"But we can't raise him sir," the radio operator said. "Maybe he didn't get out of it alive."

"Colonel Towers, can't you hear me?" Brandon yelled into his oxygen mask.

"He got out all right," the colonel said. "He's just stalling to make it look good."

"We aren't going to give up the search are we, sir?" asked the radioman.

"It would serve his soul right." The colonel stopped pacing and faced the radioman. "Keep trying to raise him, Reinhardt. I'm going to bring us down to forty thousand feet and search the area where he went down. Helluva waste of rocket fuel tooling around in the atmosphere," he muttered, disappearing through a bulkhead door.

"Wait! Colonel Towers!" Brandon called. But he knew it was no use. Obviously he could pick up Astro but they could neither see nor hear him.

"Captain Brandon, this is Astro calling. Over." The radioman repeated the phrase a dozen times and each time Brandon acknowledged, swore and acknowledged again. Finally, in desperation, he switched off the tele-talkie.

He snapped open the back of the unit and studied the maze of transistors, resistors, and capacitators. If there was something wrong it was subtle, like a burned out resistor or a shorted condenser. Whatever it was, it was beyond emergency repair. He dropped the tele-talkie behind the seat and examined the gauge on his oxygen tank. There was enough to last the night but not much more.

He sat down in the capsule to think. The first thing they'd locate is the burning ship, he decided. Then they would probably start searching in ever-widening circles. But would they see him in the faint light of the ice moons?

He looked back at the nylon chute again. Another thought ran through his mind. Suppose they don't spot me in the dark. When the sun—Sirius, I mean—comes up, there's a good chance they'll spot the parachute and search for him.

He slid the canopy open and looked down at the red soil of Sirius Three. He hesitated for a moment, then swung his feet over the side and dropped to the ground.

"At least I'll have that satisfaction," he said, grinning under his oxygen mask.

Very much aware of gravity after years of weightlessness, he walked to the canopy of the chute and spread it out on the flat ground in a full circle. It billowed in the wind. He searched around, found some glassy black rocks and anchored down the chute.

Then he looked at the orange glow that marked the funeral pyre of the ship. He had a deci-

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sion to make; stay here with the capsule or head for the fire.

Couldn't be more than a thousand yards away, he decided. Charging a walkaround oxygen bottle, he transferred his oxygen hose to it. He snapped the survival kit to his belt and picked up the tele-talkie.

The ship was more than a thousand yards away. The first mile was across flat desert. He picked his way cautiously, his boots churning up clouds of powdery dust. He remembered the Russian reports of the weird and deadly creatures they had encountered in the Martian deserts.

But aside from a few gray patches of brush there seemed to be no sign of life. After all, he thought, the Earth held no life for the better part of its existence. And Towers had selected this planet because it bore relatively the same relationship to the brighter, hotter Sirius as did the Earth to the sun. While farther away it should have approximately the same conditions as did the Earth. And it had seas, not as large as on Earth, but seas, nevertheless.

Yet there was a fallacy in the argument. Presumably all of the stars in the outer arms of the Milky Way and their planets were about the same age. With similar conditions as the Earth, life must have been born and walked out of the seas of Sirius Three just as it did on Earth.

Something scurried into a whisp of brush, as if to bear out Brandon's realization. He froze, his eyes on the brush, his hand reaching for his hydro-static shock pistol. He could hear nothing but the wind hollowing his ears. He stood for a long moment, then cautiously skirted the brush, and continued on toward the burning ship. There was an odd clicking sound and he stopped. It sounded again. Brandon realized he was perspiring despite the chill of the desert night. Again he moved on, the sound fading in the distance behind him.

The next mile brought him to a great sheet of ancient lava laid bare by the elements. He climbed to the top. The fire still seemed to be about a thousand yards ahead, beyond a ridge of low hills.

A distant flare lit up the sky ahead of him. It glowed for a few moments and died. They've found the ship, he thought. After four years, I had completely forgotten about the store of photo-flash flares.

He watched for awhile but saw no more flares. Finally he scrambled down the other side of the lava sheet and continued on toward the wreck, moving slowly but steadily.

The third mile brought him to the scene of the crash. A smoking cylinder of fused metal lay in a gully. Parts were strewn along the bottom. A wing, untouched by the fire, was leaning tip down against the edge of an-

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other lava sheet some distance away.

He sat down. Another flare flashed in the sky behind him silhouetting a row of grotesque trees. I'm over here, you fools, he thought. He watched until the flare flickered out, then turned his head back toward the remains of the ship. There wasn't much of a glow to it now. It would be hard to see unless Astro was right on top of it.

He raised the antenna on the tele-talkie and snapped it on. The screen glowed into life. Towers was stepping through the bulkhead door into the radio room. Just like a television play in installments, Brandon thought. Scene two coming up.

"No sign of him at the scene of the crash," Towers told Reinhardt.

"If he got out," observed Reinhardt, "he could be a hundred miles away or more."

"*If* he got out," Towers said in a tone that irritated Brandon.

"I got out," Brandon said. "And right now I'm walking around your precious planet like a boy scout. Damn this tele-talkie! I'd give a year's pay if you could see me now, Towers."

"We may yet spot the escape capsule," Reinhardt was saying.

"We're still continuing the search," put in Towers. "But I don't mind telling you I'm not wasting much more fuel."

The radio operator started to say something, hesitated and finally settled for, "yes, sir."

Brandon swore and snapped off the set. He looked at his walk-around bottle.

"Can't stay here any longer," he muttered.

He couldn't find the capsule. He walked three, perhaps four miles. He stopped and blotted his moist brow with his sleeve. He wasn't going to find it. Before him stretched an endless carpet of red dust. The light from the two moons was growing dim, as each settled toward different horizons.

He sat down. A cloud of powdery dust settled over his legs. The lightness in his head told him that his oxygen was running out. The weakness in his muscles reminded him that it had been a long time since he had walked in a planet's gravity. A distant flare lit up the horizon. He choked off a sob, and beat his fist in the red dust. A wave of nausea swept over him. Bitter stomach juices welled up in his throat but he swallowed them down again.

Desperately he turned on the tele-talkie.

"Astro, this is Brandon," he said.

"Brandon, this is Astro," Reinhardt said.

Brandon's body tensed. "Thank God I finally got through to you. Listen, Reinhardt, I must be about three—"

"Brandon, this is Astro," said Reinhardt in a monotone. He said it again and again and again.

Brandon fell back on the

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ground. His breathing was short, strained. His face was bathed in perspiration. The oxygen, he realized, was giving out.

What are the odds, that the air of Sirius Three is breathable, he wondered. One in a hundred? The planet has water and both animal and plant life. Certainly it has sufficient gravity to hold its oxygen. But what other elements—noxious gases might be present. Maybe the odds are closer to one in fifty, he decided.

"But it's no gamble when you have nothing to lose," he told the Milky Way.

Ripping off his oxygen mask, he took a deep breath of the alien atmosphere. The dust choked him, his ears rang. Black spots danced before his eyes, then melted into solid blackness.

Brandon could hear Towers' voice in a vortex of darkness.

"Let's face it—Brandon is dead. Must have burned with the ship, at least that's the way the report will read. Get me, Reinhardt?"

"Yes, sir," the disembodied voice of Reinhardt replied quietly.

"We're going to set her down on a solid piece of ground near one of the oceans." There was a pause and Brandon could almost see Colonel Towers drawing up to his full height. "I'm going to be the first man to set foot on a planet of another solar system. Know what that means, Reinhardt?"

"A quantum jump sir?"

"Right. Leap-froging ahead of the Reds. Wait till they read the name Colonel John Towers—maybe *General* John Towers—*General*"

Brandon opened his eyes. Sirius was turning the sky to gray, trimming a few scattered clouds with gold. As he stared at the sky, Sirius rose with a brassy glare. Near it he could see its white hot dwarf star companion. It was going to be a real scorcher, he decided; worse than any desert on Earth. He sat up stiffly.

On the tele-talkie screen, Reinhardt, alone in the radio room, was calling quietly for Brandon. The bulkhead door swung open and Towers poked his head through.

"Knock that off," said Towers sternly, "and take your landing station." As Reinhardt rose to his feet, Brandon reached over and turned off the set.

Brandon took a deep breath. His head spun and for the first time he realized that he was still alive. He gazed across the shimmering desert to a ridge of scrubby hills. Blue mountains rose up beyond them. Great floes of black lava had rolled down onto the desert floor at some distant time. They were spotted with clumps of gray grass even as was the desert. The hills were studded with weird trees standing stiff, branches outstretched, like an army of scarecrows.

The air of Sirius Three was doing strange things to him. Two of the trees seemed to be

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moving. He swayed and sat heavily.

As he watched through a haze of red dust whipped up by the morning breeze, the two trees came closer, turned into men wearing desert uniforms and leaned over him.

"Are you okay?" one of them asked.

Brandon said nothing.

"We saw you from our observation station over on the hill," said the other pointing.

They helped Brandon to his feet and gave him a swig of cool, sweet water from a canteen.

"I'm Captain Brandon, of the Astro One."

"Astro One?" The man removed his pith helmet to wipe his brow and Brandon noticed the gleaming US insignia on the front of the helmet. "The Astro One left Earth thirteen years ago," the man said.

"Only four years by RT," Brandon said.

The man smiled and put his helmet back on his head. "A lot of things have happened since you left. There was a war which we won, and I guess you guys were almost forgotten. And there was a lot of technological development.

"You mean you had a quantum jump?" asked Brandon parrotting Colonel Towers' favorite expression.

"Odd you would know that," replied the second man. "It was through quantum mechanics that we learned to approximate the speed of light. While nine years pass on Earth when we make the trip, our RT is mere moments."

"Good Lord!" Brandon said. "You must have passed us up."

"Been on this planet for nearly a year," the first man said. "Got men on dozens of planetary systems throughout the Milky Way. One ship went a thousand light years out. By the time they come back, civilization on Earth will be two thousand years older."

"Have you got a tele-talkie?" Brandon asked.

"Sure," said the first man, producing a set one-third the size of Brandon's.

"Could you tune it to 28.6 microcycles?"

"Sure," the man said again. He turned a dial with his thumb and handed the unit to Brandon. Brandon depressed the "talk" button. A crystal clear image of Colonel Towers, putting the finishing touches on his full dress uniform, appeared on the screen.

"This is an historic occasion," Colonel Towers was announcing to his crew. "Open the hatch—and, Reinhardt, be sure to stand by with the motion picture camera."

"Excuse me, Colonel Towers," said Brandon quietly.

Towers swung around and looked out at Brandon. The colonel's face paled.

"I have something to tell you," said Brandon grinning, "about the quantum jump."

THE END

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SUBTERFUGE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

The missionary landed on the planet of pleasant sin. He wasn't worried about his assignment. He had a plan. Or did the plan have him?

THE Home Office sent Mather Sullin to Gamma Crucis IX because he was the best man for the job. It was as simple as that. The Home Office believed in the direct approach, without frills.

After all, Sullin had spent four years among the furry beings of Deneb XIX and had departed leaving the Church of the Deeper Communion a going concern there. Sullin had brought illum-

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ination to the lawless colonists of Rigel III, had served nobly and well on the fifth world of the double sun Albireo and left there with nudism totally suppressed. It was an enviable record. On any empirical basis, Sullin was a first-rate missionary.

It was after the successful Albireo mission that the Home Office earmarked him for Gamma Crucis IX. The Church allowed a missionary seven months of rest and meditation between assignments; toward the end of that period, Sullin received a summons from the central authority, and, leaving his retreat in Arizona, journeyed westward to the Home Office in Los Angeles.

The Home Office was a squarish, massive black marble building on Venice Boulevard. Sullin, a tall, angular figure garbed completely in black, his harsh-featured face tanned by the rays of many suns, made the familiar trek to his own superior's office, presented himself with a curt nod, and after common prayer received his next assignment.

"The job is difficult, Mather. It will test your faith."

Sullin eyed the suspiciously-flabby man behind the desk—Leonid Markell, Director of Proselyte Activity—and favored him with one of his rare smiles. "I welcome any such tests," Sullin said. His voice, like his face and his heart, was cold and bleak.

"You're the fourth man we've sent there in the last fifty years. Hearn, Kiley, and Mathewson preceded you. Good men, all of them. Gone."

Sullin shrugged. "I am not afraid."

"There's one thing I ought to warn you about, though," Markell said. He leaned forward and locked his plump fingers together in a manner which Sullin found offensive. "Gamma Crucis IX seems to be a very sinful place. In fact—from what I glean from the reports of your predecessors—sin seems to be compulsory, by law."

Inwardly Sullin glowed, but immediately he suppressed the feeling of pleasure. He inclined his head forward. "I will undertake the assignment, Dr. Markell. I welcome challenge."

Frowning slightly, Markell said, "You take pride in your incorruptibility, don't you, Sullin?"

"Pride," said Sullin glacially, "is sinful."

He left at the end of that month, aboard the freightship *Berengaria*. Sullin, travelling alone and living in a barren little alcove back of the cargo hold, took little baggage with him. He packed only a few clothes, chiefly his black suits, and carried three books, all of which he knew by heart: the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the 2291 (revised and edited) edition of Marley's *A History of the Neopuritan Movement on Earth*.

The *Berengaria* bore a cargo of matterports intended for Gamma Crucis IV, but it would

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make a special stop to deliver the missionary to the ninth world. The Church of the Deeper Communion accepted the free passage as a tithe from the shipowner, a wealthy African Neopuritan. Each morning, Sullin, as the ranking ecclesiastic aboard, led the crew of eleven Terrans in prayer; he spent the rest of the day, as was his custom, in reading and in solitary contemplation.

He was thirty-six. He had been mortgaged to the Church by his father, an impecunious hymn-writer of Nebraska, at the age of seven, in return for a grant-in-aid toward the completion of a Neopuritan hymnal. At eleven, he had elected to enter the missionary service, and at twenty he had made his first extrasolar journey. It had been successful. So had the others, in the succeeding sixteen years. Sullin did not feel confidence—that was a form of pride—but he had solid faith in his ability to sway the sinful inhabitants of Gamma Crucis IX.

As always, he had prepared himself fully for the new assignment by making a detailed study of the world to which he had been posted.

He knew that it was an Earth-type planet, roughly, with a grav constant of .86 Earthnorm, a slightly euphoric atmosphere rich in oxygen, and a climatic register of 1.36, which meant a planetwide mean temperature range between 68 and 83 degrees Fahrenheit.

He knew that it had been settled three hundred years earlier, in 2117, by a heterogenous band of Terran colonists who had formed a chartered company for the purpose. The present population was about eighteen million, so far as was known; the last Galactic Census had been taken forty years previously. Hypnopedically implanted in him was a working knowledge of the local dialect, a variety of Standard English.

He knew, too, that the people of Gamma Crucis IX were lazy, shiftless, and Godless, that they were favored by climate and fertility and so had developed little strength of character and no sense of the fear of God. Sullin was prepared to cope with that.

He was ready for Gamma Crucis IX.

On the ninth of September, 2417, shiptime, a voice outside his cabin informed him, "We're in orbit round IX, Dr. Sullin. You'll be dropped in thirteen minutes."

Methodically Sullin packed his few belongings and made his way foreward to the main ejection hatch, where they were readying a dropshaft for him. He handed his suitcase to one of the men, who secured it in the cargo compartment of the dropshaft, which was a bullet-shaped object some eight feet high, powered by its own small gravionic drive and pre-set to land him at the main spaceport of the planet below. A planetfall for the entire ship was wasteful and expen-

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sive; Sullin had refused to let them land to convenience him, insisting rather on the more economical dropshaft landing.

The captain, an overly-jovial Swede named Jorgenson, grinned broadly and wished him luck. "You'll need it down there, begging your pardon, Doctor."

"Luck is no substitute for faith, Captain," Sullin returned austerely. "But I thank you for the courtesy shown me on this journey."

He uttered a brief prayer and entered the dropshaft. The door was slammed and dogged shut. He strapped himself securely and waited, dwelling in his mind on certain of the Epistles of Paul.

Moments later came the slight shock of release, as his dropshaft slid through the ejection hatch and, accelerating, shot away from the *Berengaria's* side and began its long and gentle drop toward the surface of Gamma Crucis IX.

The customs official said, "Name and planet?"

"Mather Sullin. Earth."

"Occupation?"

"Religious instructor."

The official stared at him sourly for a moment, then shrugged and wrote it down anyway. He was a small, deeply-tanned, roly-poly man who wore a loincloth and a tattooed badge of office. He sat with legs crossed atop his desk at the spaceport where Sullin had landed.

"Any infectious diseases?"

"None."

"How much contraband do you want to declare?"

"Pardon me?" Sullin asked primly.

"I said, how much contraband? Weapons, drugs, pornofilms, poisons, and other harmful and injurious matter prohibited by the Galactic Trade Covenant. You're allowed $2,000 worth duty-free; above that, it's dutiable."

A bit shaken, Sullin said, "I have no such items with me."

The customs man chuckled and genially thumped Sullin's suitcase. "That's a switch, ain't it? I'll bet this things *loaded* with narcotics."

Sullin whitened and said, "Inspect it."

"You crazy? Mister, it's twenty-eight years since I got this job, and I haven't opened a suitcase yet. You want me to get fired?" He ripped a sticker from a pad and slapped it on Sullin's luggage without another glance. "Go on through to Immigration. You're clear here."

Sullin shrugged and moved on. The air was balmy, almost muggy; his coarse black linen garments clung to his body. A great lazy sun floated far overhead; fleecy yellow-rimmed clouds drifted by. Here and there in the customs area, men and women sat dozing in the sun, and under a thick-leaved shrub he was startled to see a couple locked in a passionate embrace.

His thin lips firmed; he put down his luggage and walked briskly toward the intertwined

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couple. He stood over them; they did not look up.

Coldly he said, "Love is a sacrament that is blessed by privacy. Your public display is shocking and immoral. It indicates—"

A hand gripped his forearm tightly. Surprised, he turned and saw a bearded young man who smiled and said, "Doctor Sullin?"

"That's right."

"I'm Henriks, Director of Immigration. Customs just warned me you've arrived. I'm afraid you'll have to leave those people alone or face prosecution."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't," Henriks said amiably. "Suppose you come along with me and I'll try to explain. You're violating the Interference and Personal Liberty Act by bothering them."

Sullin felt a first faint tremor of alarm, but immediately banished it. He thrived on challenges. Perhaps immorality was legal on Gamma Crucis IX, but he would change all that in time. He merely had to demonstrate the logical necessity of morality, and staunch Neopuritanism would be the inevitable outcome.

He followed Henriks into the Immigration Office.

They stared at each other across the desk, the stiff-backed Neopuritan missionary and the slouching immigration officer, and finally Henriks said, "Why do you people keep coming here?"

"To show you the truth."

Henriks sighed. "Well, if it keeps you happy I guess we can't deny you the right of entry. But you'll have to abide by our laws while you're here. It's illegal to interfere with another person's pleasure unless he's acting contrary to the public good, and you'd damned well be ready to prove your charge. It's also illegal to conduct yourself in such a fashion as to cause public unhappiness. You must remember that we have only one crime on Harmony: gloom."

"Harmony? That's the local planetary name?"

Henriks nodded. After a moment he said, "You're the fourth of your kind to come. Neopuritan preachers, I mean. The first was a man named Hearn, who came before I was born. We executed him."

"Executed?"

"For violation of the laws. It was either that or deport him, and he wouldn't let us do that." Hendriks reflected a moment. "After that came Kiley. I remember him—he looked like you, tall and bleak and mean-looking. He committed suicide. And then there was Mathewson, about a decade ago."

"What happened to him?"

Henriks shrugged. "Vanished. We never found out where he went."

Sullin felt no fear. He did not expect to go the way of his predecessors. He was solid in his faith, and there was nothing this immoral planet could do that

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would shake his inner convictions.

"You're trying to frighten me," he said deliberately. "Well, I say in humility that I'm incapable of fear. I have come here to serve a task and I shall do it."

"You mean, preach Neopuritanism?"

"That's the colloquial term. I intend to introduce the Church of the Deeper Communion to this world."

"You're welcome to try. But I'm warning you: you won't get anywhere except inside the local jail. The next time you start preaching hellfire and damnation to any of the locals, you'll be run in."

"Thank you for the advice," Sullin said evenly. He gathered together his documents and his baggage and proceeded on through the immigration center, and hired a taxi to take him to the city proper.

A strategem was beginning to form in his mind. His three predecessors had evidently made the error of trying to fight this world head-on, and the collision had destroyed them. Sullin was more devious than that. When necessary, he could be subtle, and subtlety seemed to be called for in the case of this planet.

Laxity and immorality was the norm; virtue was illegal. Not only would they not listen to him if he attempted immediately to preach Godly ways, they would arrest him (and, if he persisted, execute him). It was pointless to attempt the direct assault. Instead, he thought, an attack from *within* was needed. An infiltration tactic. Maintaining his inner probity, he would adopt the outer guise of immorality as one would a cloak, and thus armored would launch his campaign. He would attack them under cover of camouflage.

Yes, he thought triumphantly. Camouflage!

A sleepy *concierge* rented him a room in the heart of the ramshackle city of Niente, the capital, as it turned out, of Harmony. A muggy, soporific blanket of heat hung low over the city at noonday. The entire planet seemed endlessly becalmed, a leisure-drenched tropical paradise.

In his first few days, Sullin familiarized himself with the local customs and mores, and planned his campaign. The locals, he discovered, wore as few clothes as they had to; though there was no active cult of nudism, as there had been on Albireo V before the advent of Sullin, there was no highly-developed sense of shame. Sullin detected snickers at his own black garb, and at the earliest possible moment he purchased a local breechclout and donned that instead.

He prayed to be forgiven for thus revealing his body. It was toward a justifiable end that he did so, he argued. He could accomplish nothing here if he held himself aloof from the ways of the people.

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A week after his arrival, he subradioed a coded message to the Home Office. It read as follows:

16 September 2417
Brothers in the Lord:

It has been a week since I reached this Godless planet, and I wish to report partial success in my work already. I have made that most difficult first step, contact with the natives.

To this end I have intentionally avoided the errors of my forerunners in this mission, who unbendingly sought to reproach these people and who thereby ran afoul of the pernicious local legislation, which insures the continuation of immorality on this world.

I have, rather, adopted the philosophy that I shall undertake a Fifth Column of Virtue, as it were, and bring Truth to these people despite themselves. To this end I have adopted local garb (or lack thereof) and assumed the pose of a wealthy Terran tourist who incidentally is a member of our Church. This way I circumvent the laws against proselytizing, which are severe. Already I have made several friendships here with people of deplorable moral standards, who I am sure would have shunned me if I had approached them in my true guise.

I grant the unorthodoxy of this approach, but point to my success on Albireo V, where by participating in the common nudity I eventually was able to persuade the ignorant savages that—

On his eleventh day on Harmony, Mather Sullin experienced the taste of alcohol for the first time in his thirty-six years.

It happened in a bistro on the corner of the street of his hotel; *The Red Dragon* was its name, and Sullin had taken to frequenting it, as part of his campaign to attack this culture from within. He had made several friends in the tavern, and often he spent time with them, clutching a drink in his hand but never tasting it.

Finally one night a member of the group said, "Sully, how come you buy drinks but never taste them?"

Sullin blinked at him. "What do you mean, George?"

George Wright was a cheerful, wide-hipped man of forty or fifty who currently lived with three bosomy young concubines in a shack further along the street. He said, "I mean just what I say. You always *hold* the damn drinks, but you never touch them."

Sullin realized that his camouflage had parted and some of the Neopuritan in him was showing through the chink. He knew he had to squelch this suspicion at once.

He said, "You're mistaken. I drink as much as anybody here."

"Never while I'm looking." Wright seemed to be growing belligerent about it.

"He's right, Sully," said Janet,

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the youngest and currently most pregnant of the concubines. "*I've* never seen you touch the stuff either."

Recklessly Sullin said, "I'll show you, then. Waiter! A round for the house, on me!"

"What'll it be, Chief?"

Sullin looked helplessly at Wright. "You name it, George."

"Let's have graffa for everyone," Wright bellowed. "Green, not blue."

The drinks arrived—gleaming green liquid in earthenware mugs. Sullin drew a bill from his pocket (the Church was well endowed) and received only a few coppers in change. He grasped one of the mugs firmly.

"Mud in your eye," he said. He had been studying up.

He downed the drink in one long ecstatic gulp, praying silently as he swallowed.

Thunder and brimstone! he thought as it landed in his gullet, and then, realizing he had sworn, he closed his eyes and begged for forgiveness. He had some trouble opening them again. He felt dizzy and hot in the face, and his throat burned agonizingly.

When he looked around again, the first thing he saw was George Wright's pale, startled face.

"Great blaspheming Jehosaphat," Wright muttered. "He *does* drink after all! Sully, how do you feel?"

"F-fine." He had some difficulty enunciating.

"Take his pulse, somebody. Get him some water. Sully, is *that* the way they drink graffa where you come from?"

A tipsy smile appeared on the missionary's features. "Always," he said. He started to topple forward, but steadied himself in time, bracing himself against the wooden legs of the table. He was aware he had made a powerful impression on the others. He was also aware of the musky nearness of Janet and Marga and Beryl, and furthermore was aware that if he tried to stand up he would collapse. He prayed, vehemently, and told himself that he had taken a mighty stride toward his goal.

In his next report to the Home Office he said:

During this past week I have added another string to my bow by revealing myself—Lord forgive me—as one who is fond of alcohol. The natives are incredibly impressed. I pray nightly for the strength to continue.

I am confident of ultimate success now. Soon I will declare my true faith to them. My nucleus of dissolute friends will undoubtedly yield to Truth at once. They will be my first disciples on this sin-blackened world.

Sullin made his first attempt at a conversion near the end of his third month on Harmony. By that time, he had established himself in a wide circle as a hail-fellow-well-met, cheerful, free-spending. At first the pose had been a strain for the dour Sullin, but it had gradually become sec-

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ond nature to him; he thanked the Lord for having given him strength to go on.

He lay in the warm sands at Harmony Beach, overlooking the magnificent golden-green sweep of the sea, with Wright's concubine Beryl not far from his side. They lay in the shade of a grapefruit tree, and from time to time one of the succulent fruits would land nearby, ripe and tasty.

It was Beryl who brought the matter up. She had discarded her few wisps of clothing, and lay facing the warm sun, her curved brown body growing browner. Sullin was maintaining a modest distance and averting his eyes except when to do so would be to contradict his assumed personality traits.

She said, "I'm thinking of leaving George."

His eyes widened. Had he, somehow, implanted the seed of morality in her through casual conversation? He decided to risk it. "You make me very happy, Beryl."

"But how did you know—"

"I suspected it all along."

"I thought I was keeping it a secret," she said poutingly. "I guess it showed all over me."

He smiled paternally. "I can tell when a person awakens to Truth, Beryl. I knew you were ripening toward it. Your life with George was crude and hollow. One of three, a plaything for his lust—"

"You sound funny when you say that. But you're absolutely right. I *was* pretty tired of George. It was just a matter of making up my mind what I really wanted. It'll be a new life for me—if I'm welcome, I mean."

"Anyone willing is welcome," Sullin said sonorously. "One must work to merit happiness, of course."

She giggled. "Well, I'm a pretty fair cook, and I can keep house, if *that's* what you mean by work. I'm good at other things, too." She sprang to her feet, lithe, nude, a perfect example of the Creator's work. "Come on. We'll get my things from George's shack right now, and I'll move in with you right now!"

"I—you—"

The words died, a strangled gargle in the back of his throat. Aghast, he realized they had been talking at cross purposes; she meant to enter, not the Church, but his bed and his arms.

For an instant he felt the sands opening before him, and the bottomless pit seemed to beckon.

"You okay, Sully?"

"The heat—" he muttered, touching his forehead. "I'll—I'll be all right."

She was holding him solicitously. Sweat coursed down Sullin's face. His panic subsided. *I will save their souls,* he told himself grimly, *even if I must lose my own in so doing.*

He rationalized desperately. The girl would serve as further camouflage; later, when his campaign had openly begun, he could

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repudiate her and welcome her back as a Magdalen.

Hand in hand, they ran up the sloping beach. Sullin's heart pounded strangely.

That night, he attempted to write his regular report to the Home Office. Somehow, though, he was unable to make the phrases come out properly, and he postponed the report until the next day, when he could integrate this new experience into his personality.

As it happened, it was more than six months before he managed to file his next report. It was a brief one. It said:

Brothers in the Lord:

I crave absolution for my tardiness in reporting. The task at hand has required all my time and all my energy. Be assured that all is well here, and that our great task is progressing satisfactorily. I have not yet seen fit to establish the Church here, but that time is not far off.

Sullin.

Shortly after that, he misplaced his master code chart, and, unwilling to send any messages to Earth that could be read at the local transmitting office, decided to forego further reports until he had achieved repeal of the anti-proselytizing legislation. He would begin his campaign any day now, he told himself. He knew of many potential converts. They would be surprised, perhaps, to know that a man of God had lurked behind the personality they knew as Matt Sullin, but they would listen to him and believe. . . .

Nine years later, his eldest daughter woke him from his noonday nap with a swift, efficient kick, and told him a visitor had arrived.

Groggily, Sullin rose.

"I am Fedrik Davis, Mr. Sullin."

Sullin saw a short, waspish-looking individual clad entirely in black, a beetle of a man with frosty dark eyes and a down-turned mouth.

The man who had introduced himself as Fedrik Davis saw a tall, half-naked man past forty, going to fat, with a ragged beard and sleepy, bleary eyes. He saw a ramshackle bungalow, filled with naked children of various sizes and two sluttish-looking women, one blonde, one dark-haired.

He said, "I represent the Church of the Deeper Communion, Mr. Sullin. I arrived on this world today. We have been deeply worried about you."

"Yes."

"You have failed to report."

"I know."

Sniffing, Fedrik Davis said, "Evidently you have disintegrated completely, Mr. Sullin. I had the honor of meeting you once, years ago, at the Home Office. I remember a crisp, well-groomed man with an air of authority. What I see now, Mr. Sullin, horrifies me."

Sullin shook his head. "You—

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don't understand," he said dreamily. "Haven't disintegrated. I still have my faith—"

"In this filth? Naked, unkempt, surrounded by these women and these children?"

"No—no—you don't see my plan," Sullin protested. "These—just camouflage. I had to prove I was of good will. Otherwise they arrest you here. Laws against preaching and moralizing."

"I'm aware of the sinful code of dishonor that thrives here."

"You see, then," Sullin went on. "I pretended to go native. Going to establish the Church next week. Yes. Next week."

Fedrik Davis laughed coldly. "I've come to save you the trouble. I'm instructed to relieve you of your responsibilities, Mr. Sullin. The Gamma Crucis IX mission has been entrusted to me."

Sullin shrugged vacantly. "Good luck, then."

He turned and shambled back into the hut.

Fedrik Davis stood on the porch a long moment, frowning thoughtfully, feeling deep pity and regret. The alien air of Gamma Crucis IX was sweet and tempting, and it had destroyed Mather Sullin. The poor man lived in a daze of delusion.

Davis turned from the house, *But he had the right idea,* he thought. *About camouflage. You can't attack these people head-on. You have to do it subtly. But it takes a strong man to don that sort of camouflage and preserve his soul despite it.*

Davis was a man of fortitude. He would succeed, where Sullin had failed, a victim of the euphoric air and light gravity and balmy weather.

Camouflage, he thought. *Yes, that's what I'll do. But just for the first few weeks.*

THE END

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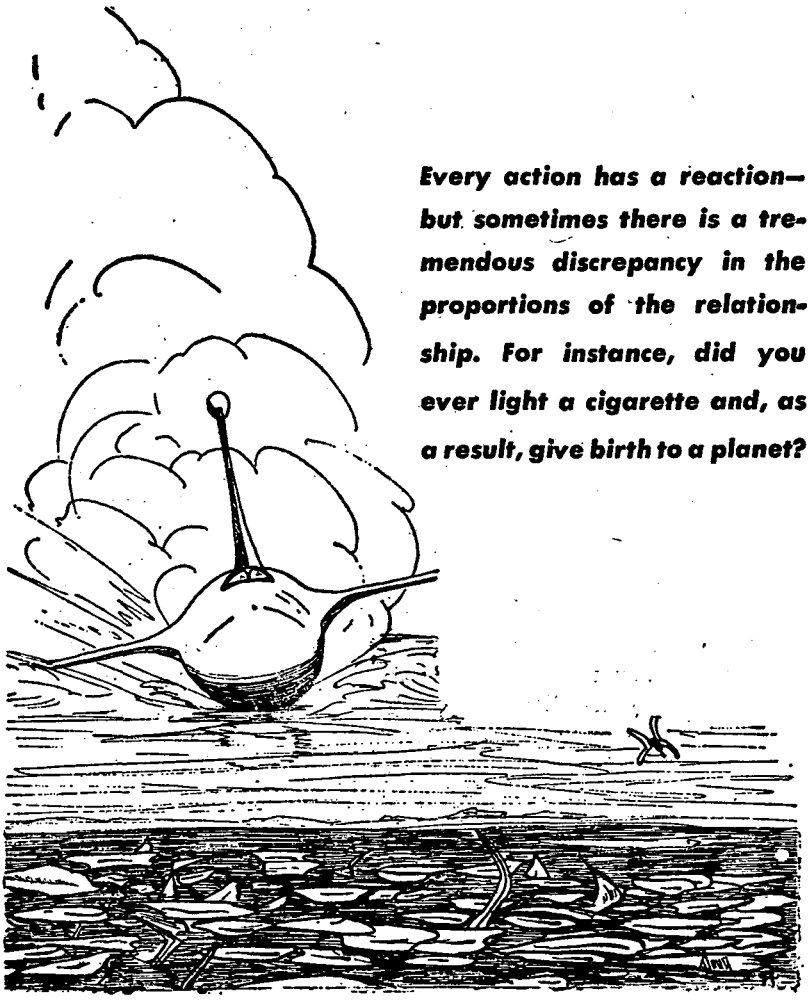
The Flames Of Life

By THEODORE L. THOMAS

Illustrated by DOUGLAS



Every action has a reaction—but sometimes there is a tremendous discrepancy in the proportions of the relationship. For instance, did you ever light a cigarette and, as a result, give birth to a planet?

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WHEN the alarm bell let go I knew just what Hank would do. Instead of diving for a pilot's seat like me and then looking for the trouble, he reads the board from where he is. Some day there'll be something go wrong and we'll need a man in a pilot's seat, quick, ready to fly that ship. I'll be there, and Hank'll be standing scratching himself looking at the board. You know how these big guys are.

Anyhow, that alarm bell started up, and I hit a seat and got strapped up and looked around. It was the liquid hydrogen pressure that was down, so there was no flying to do. I unstrapped and pushed across the cabin and went in through the small hatch and worked my way through the tubing and wiring and structural members until I came to the propellant tank. Hank was there, tightening up nuts on the pump. "Gasket," he said. "Must have let go since our last checkout. Wouldn't you think on a new ship like this they could find a lousy gasket that wouldn't blow?"

That was Hank all right; I expected him to talk like that, never thinking about the important things, such as—how much fuel we got left. I pulled myself forward to look at the tank gauge and Hank said, "About ten days' supply left, I make it. What do you think is in there?"

I looked and did a little figuring in my head and told him, "About twelve days', I'd say. We got to find us a planet right now, and take on some more hydrogen."

We fixed the pump and went back to the cabin and got to work with the spectroscope. I fanned the nearby star clusters with the scope while Hank manned the UV eyepiece. It was two hours before we found a likely-looking sun. We figured its position and set up an intercept course. Hank broke to eat while I put the ship on its new course. Then there wasn't much to do for five days.

By that time we were close enough to begin checking out planets. In an hour we had one that showed the presence of water. I sat back, and Hank looked up and grinned at me, and we shook hands on it. Neither of us had said much about the spot we were in, because there wasn't much point. When you run out of fuel in deep space, talking doesn't help much; you got to do something.

Hank said, "Going to name it?"

Whenever a scout ship comes up with a new planet, the Chief has the right to name it. I said, "No, not now. We got work to do." First things first, I always say.

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I pushed through some calculations, and we were not in as good shape as we had thought. We didn't have enough hydrogen to take us all the way to the planet; the last day and the landing would have to be dead-stick. You can see that this takes some nice navigation. We had to hit that planet and be captured by it in a fast-collapsing orbit, or we'd find ourselves starving to death in a perpetual orbit, or maybe we'd miss being captured at all, kind of bounce away.

I tell you, there are very few scout ships that have been navigated the way Hank and I navigated ours for the next five days; we did nothing but correct our bearing. We rode the verniers like they've never been ridden before. Every hour pulled us closer and allowed us to lay out a more accurate course. At the end of the fourth day we were dealing with microseconds of arc, and the last day we went even finer than that. For the final twenty-six minutes of fuel time we had a real problem. We used the bow braking rockets and it was hard to navigate that way, but we did it. Then we had a dead ship on our hands.

Hank acted just like I knew he would. "Okay," he said. "We've got eight hours until we reach the atmosphere. This'll give you seven hours' sleep. Let's go." I didn't mind. It makes Hank feel pretty good to boss me around once in a while. I climbed into the sack and Hank did too, and both of us went to sleep right off. The buzzer woke us in seven hours.

Flying one of those space ships dead-stick in an atmosphere is like trying to fly a stone. I did the flying while Hank kept me filled with the information I needed. He called off air speed, air temperature, skin temperature, altitude, roll angle, pitch angle, along with the approximate degrees of longitude and latitude when we were in the dark half of the planet. Hank also took care of the trim of the ship. I had to do all the flying, so I couldn't look around much.

After about the sixth bounce off the top of the atmosphere, Hank said, "No clouds. Lots of water in the atmosphere, but no clouds."

I always pay attention to the immediate problem and don't worry about other things, so I didn't answer. We finally slowed enough so that we stayed in the atmosphere, and from then on things got hectic. I was busy killing speed by stalling and falling out, working my way down through the atmosphere. We got close enough finally so that I could see we were in some trouble. "Hey," I said to Hank.

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"That's not solid land down there is it?"

"I beeped it," said Hank. "Most of it is swamp about a foot above sea level. Can you land on the water and let the ship slide up on the land?"

"Sure. You find the land and point her out to me."

Well, in another twenty minutes we had about run out of steam. Hank pointed ahead to the patch of brown he had picked. I banked and touched down a quarter of a mile away. Two great streams of water spouted up on each side of the ship as we skimmed along. Five hundred yards from the land the velocity was low enough that the lift was gone from the wings. The right wing dropped and touched the water and bounced up. This dropped the left wing to the water, and then it bounced up. The two wing tips slapped the water alternately and it sounded like a machine gun going off. Inside the ship Hank and I almost had our heads shaken off. It was rough. Neither one of us even felt it when the ship rode up on land. When it stopped we were too dazed to notice for a few minutes. I've had some bad shakings in my time, but never anything like that.

The first thing I did was pull some of the atmosphere into the analyzer. I pushed the button, and the green light came on under the word "breathable."

"Hey," I said to Hank, "we won't have to wear our suits. Good breathable air out there."

"I don't know. Look here."

Hank was looking out the front ports, so I looked too. It looked greyish-black, and I couldn't understand it; we had landed in broad daylight. "Bugs," said Hank. "This place is alive with insects. We'd better wear our suits until we see what they are like."

"Just our luck," I said. "What did you notice about the planet? Any life?" I do all of the piloting, so I leave it to Hank to take care of all the things that aren't so important.

"Well," said Hank. "It's about twice the size of Earth, and it has a mass of about one and a half times that of Earth. Rotation—I don't know, but it must be very slow if it has any at all. Seems to be mostly swamp, no real dry land, no hills. We've got us a swamp planet here. But as long as it's got water so we can make our hydrogen, let's not worry about it. I didn't see any life except these swamp plants and the bugs."

I said, "Let's go outside and rig a water intake. We don't want to stay here any longer than we have to."

As we suited up, Hank said,

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"That was one of the nicest jobs of piloting I've seen. Real sweet." And he poked me on the shoulder. That's one of the things I like about Hank. A lot of guys would be afraid to tell the Chief he did a good job—looks too much like he's buttering him up. Not Hank. He calls them the way he sees them, that boy.

We went out the lock, and the ground was soft and wet and spongy underfoot. I drove my heel in, and watched the hollow fill with water. Every time one of our footsteps disturbed the stiff vegetation, clouds of insects poured up around us. We moved a little bit away from the ship, and then stood still and looked around. After we'd stood awhile the bugs kind of thinned out. Without moving his feet, Hank flipped his helmet back and breathed the air. I did the same.

The air smelled wet and chill, and there was a faint touch of rottenness in it. As far as the eye could see there was the low-lying, wet flats, and the stretches of water. The vegetation was mostly a mixture of a wiregrass that looked like the marshgrass of Earth, and a thick-stemmed ground vine with large, almost square, red-bordered leaves. But the sky was the worst part of it.

There was no trace of clouds, there was no haze, no mistiness. The usual blueness of the sky of an Earth-type planet was, missing. Instead the sky was colored a pale orange. The yellow sun burned coldly at a position corresponding to midmorning on Earth.

"Funny place," said Hank. "Doesn't make sense. Why aren't there any clouds? We didn't see a sign of weather anywhere on the whole planet." He snapped his fingers. "That's it. This place doesn't have any weather. It rotates so slowly with respect to its sun that it has reached a steady state condition. Feel that gentle drift of wind?"

I turned my cheek to seek the wind, and I found it. I said, "I'll light a cigarette; that'll make a good wind indicator." I pulled a Star out of the pack in an inner pocket and put it in my mouth. The lighter was in a different pocket, and as I strained to reach it, I inadvertently moved my feet. Instantly there was a swarm of bugs around my head, and some of them began gouging hunks out of my skin. I slapped my helmet down. It chopped the cigarette right in half, but what was worse, there must have been a thousand bugs trapped inside the helmet with me. I couldn't get at them, I yanked the helmet up again so I could start swatting, and even more flew in. They

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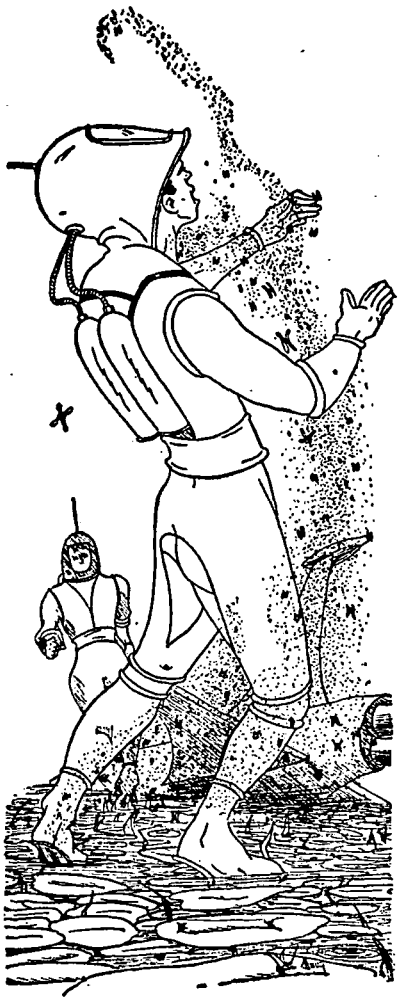

got in my eyes, my nose, my mouth, my ears, my hair, everything. It's funny how it works at a time like that. I suddenly realized that I was in trouble, very serious trouble with these bugs, yet I didn't panic. I was carefully beginning to figure a way out of the mess when I dimly heard Hank's voice above the buzzing of the bugs. "Hang on. I'm going to heat you up."

He banged my helmet shut, and I felt him fumble for my heat control. He must have turned it up full, because that suit got awful hot awful fast. The sweat broke out all over me. It got so hot I thought I would pass out, but I noticed that the bugs in the helmet were dropping to the bottom. I cut the heat back a little myself to where I could stand it, but the bugs couldn't. Soon they were all dead, and there I was with dead bugs in my helmet up to my chin. Hank said over the radio, "You all right?"

"Sure am," I said. "I'm right glad I had my N-gun with me to protect myself." I heard Hank chuckle. I always try to say something funny when things are tight—keeps Hank from getting too nervous and tied up, you know?

We walked back fast to the lock, staying ahead of the swarms of bugs that rose as we

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walked. We closed the outer door, and I stripped off my suit inside the lock so the dead bugs would not get into the ship. I was glad to get them out of my helmet, I tell you. We dropped a handful in a bag and took them inside to see what they were like. Hank seemed to be concerned about any micro-organisms they might be carrying, but he needn't have worried. The microscope and the Kwik-Kulture showed nothing pathogenic to man.

I could see that the bugs were going to be a nuisance, so to Hank, "We've got a drum of jellied hydrocarbon in stores. I'll spray some around the ship to kill the bugs so we can work in peace; we'll burn them out."

Hank walked over to the port and looked out. I know Hank, and when he acts quiet like that, something is bothering him. I asked, "What's the matter?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I've been thinking about this atmosphere. No clouds. It's strange. The thing that makes clouds form on Earth is seeding. The air is full of smoke and dust particles and tiny crystals of all kinds of salts, and these act as nuclei for the condensation of water vapor. Maybe there are no seeds in the air here, and that's why there are no clouds."

I rigged up a spray outfit with an igniter and a two-gallon container of jelly. I pulled on my suit after going over it very carefully to make sure there were no dead bugs left in it. Just as I was getting ready to go out the lock I noticed Hank working with the analytical equipment. I was getting ready to ask him what was up, when he said over his shoulder, "I'm going to run a particle count on the air—see if there are any solids in it at all. I want to pull a sample before you light a fire."

"Good," I said, and I went out the lock. I was careful to keep my helmet in place as I walked around the ship checking to see how thick the vegetation was. At the rear of the ship I found the trench the ship had made as it slid in from the water onto the marshy land. The trench was full of water now; we had sort of brought the sea inland with us. I told Hank about it over the suit radio, and told him to get the hose ready to take in water for the hydrolysis operation. He said it was all set to go.

I walked around to one side of the ship, waited for the bugs to thin out, and then aimed the sprayer out ahead of me. My finger tightened on the igniter to put a spark across the nozzle, when I saw movement in the grass a hundred yards out. I looked at it directly, and couldn't see anything, but when I

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looked above it I could see a ripple in the grass, a ripple that seemed to surround the entire ship and to flow slowly toward us. "Hank," I called. "Stand by. Something's happening out here. I can't make it out."

I could hear movement in the ship as Hank jumped to a port to look. His position was higher than mine, and he said, "Animals, or something, coming toward us through the grass. Better come inside until we know what they are."

I walked toward the lock, and then said, "I'll stay here a bit until I can see better. I have the N-gun and this flame thrower with me."

Hank grunted. "Funny. The insects aren't rising off the grasses. Wait a minute, they look like . . . my God, they look like people, small, black people crawling through the grass on their bellies. I'm coming out."

I loosened my N-gun in its holster, and made sure the flame thrower was ready to go. The circle grew closer and I could make out the black backs of the creatures. They came up to within fifteen yards of where I was standing, and then they stopped moving. Hank joined me, and we stood side by side. He said, "They're on the other side of the ship, too, so let's not let them get between us and the ship."

"Cover me," I said. "I'm going out to see what they look like." I stepped off carefully, peering through the clouds of bugs. When I got within five yards of the line of creatures, one of them stood up. What a surprise that was. The head was seal-like, with a loftier forehead and more prominent eye ridges. The body was vaguely human-like, but folds of skin connected the entire lengths of the arms and legs to the body. The front was almost hairless, and no sooner did the creature stand up than hordes of insects swarmed to its belly, attacking the grey skin, biting, digging, gouging, probing. The creature futilely rubbed its hands and arms constantly across its stomach in an effort to keep the bugs away, but the constant buzzing cloud grew thicker, and chewed at the hairless skin as soon as the arms passed over it. Finally with an air of dejection that was almost human the creature dropped down and pressed its belly into the ground, squirming to kill the insects that clung to it. Its black, back-hair seemed impervious to the bugs.

Hank came nearer from the rear. "Did you see that?" he said. "It acted like it wanted to stand up and talk, but the bugs wouldn't let it."

"That's what I thought. Do you suppose they're intelligent?"

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As if it heard and understood, the creature took something from one of its companions, and reached out and placed it at our feet. We leaned forward to see what it was. It was a neat package of a greenish, fluffy substance that looked like a seaweed, a section of a white stalk, and a fish-like animal, all bound together with a dark green band. The creature obviously offered us food, and having made the offer, they all began to withdraw. I quickly picked up the package while the creatures could still see me. I waved and bowed to them, knowing that they might well not in any way understand what I was doing.

Hank pushed past me as the creatures retreated. He walked gently, and without haste, following them at a comfortable distance. He said, "They must live somewhere around here. They can't travel very far. Yes. They're all turning toward the water. Muskrats; I'll bet they live like muskrats in burrows in the banks." He was silent while he walked toward the water and down into it a way. "Yup. One of them is showing me how they go in and out. The burrows open just beneath the water—to keep the bugs out, I guess." He was silent while he looked around, then he came walking back to the ship in a thick, black cloud of insects. "Poor things," he said. "They seem to know how bad off they are. The damn bugs own this planet. I wish there were something we could do to help them. Did you ever see a more miserable place to live?"

We looked around, and Hank was certainly right. Nothing but cold, harsh, insect-infested marshland, and calm water. And these creatures who gave us food. I shook my head and said, "I was just about to squeeze off this flame thrower when I saw them. That would have been a fine welcome. I might have killed them with it."

Hank said, "Well, we better start making hydrogen."

"Yes," I said. "I'll rig a hose to the track we made when we slid in here. You set up the hydrolysis unit. And we'd better check that gasket in the pump while we are at it." I always think it best to line up all the work right at the start. That way everybody knows what's going on, and there isn't much confusion.

We both went into the ship. While I was breaking out the hose, I heard Hank give a low whistle. I pulled the gun and jumped to him; when Hank is as surprised as that there is usually trouble. He was staring at the dial on one of the analytical instruments, and as I came up to him he said, "Less than one

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part in a trillion. That's practically impossible."

"What is?" I said.

"Solids content of the atmosphere here. This place doesn't have any condensation nuclei in the atmosphere. That's why there's no clouds. The whole atmosphere is supersaturated, particularly in the higher regions. All it would need are some salt or smoke or dirt particles, and it would cloud up and rain, bet you. This whole atmosphere is unstable, just waiting for something to kick it off."

I thought about it, and didn't like it. "Wait a minute. The water down here is saline. That would be salt crystals in the air."

"Nope. No wind, no waves, no spray."

"Meteor dust. That would seed it."

"No meteors here, probably."

"Our entry might have. . . ." I didn't finish, visualizing that dead-stick landing, slow and steady. Hank didn't say anything. I turned to finish with the hose and said, "Well, I guess we'd better watch ourselves with the atmosphere. I almost lit a cigarette out there. The smoke might have started a cloudburst. You ready for the water?"

"In a moment." Hank went to set up the hydrolysis unit.

In five minutes we were pumping water into the ship at the rate of 50 gallons a minute. The unit broke it up into hydrogen and oxygen, liquified the hydrogen, and pumped it to the hydrogen storage tank. We took the fuel pump down and fitted it with a new gasket. While we were at it, we set the alarm to give us notice when thirty-day supply of fuel was left.

There wasn't much more to do, so we wandered outside the ship and down to the water's edge; it was nothing more than an area of greater sogginess. Some of the black creatures came out to greet us; at least it seemed that way. They gave the funniest impression of knowing exactly what was in our minds. Hank and I would wonder how

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good they were at swimming: one of them would demonstrate his swimming prowess. We would wonder about their lung capacity: one of them would demonstrate that he could remain submerged for 30 minutes. They were air-breathers all right, but they certainly were at home in the water. They had to be, for every few minutes it was necessary to duck into the water to free the sensitive underbelly from insects.

The longer we lingered near the creatures the better we seemed to understand them. The understanding crept up upon us, unnoticed. When one of them made some waving motions with its arms, neither Hank nor I thought it at all strange that we knew what it meant. It wanted to be carried away from here, far away from this miserable place. "I don't blame it," said Hank. "If I had to live here I'd want to get out too." We both laughed at the way he put it. Besides I always like to laugh at Hank's little jokes. I figure it helps keep his morale up.

We went back to the ship, talking about the longing of the creatures to go someplace else. The trouble was, there *was* no place else on this planet; it was all water and swamp. At the lock Hank stopped and looked at the sky, and shook his head. "What a place. Like a powder keg. Some dust or smoke in the air, and we'd probably have a whopping storm break out. I don't like it. Let's step up the electrolysis so we can get out of here."

I agreed. The place was getting on my nerves too. We did what had to be done to increase production of hydrogen, and then we sat around again, killing time, waiting for the hydrogen to accumulate. Hank got restless.

He had been staring out through a porthole. He muttered, more to himself than to me, "Never heard of an atmosphere like this, ready to bust out." He turned to me and said, "Did you ever run an analysis of this atmosphere?"

I shook my head. "Nope, not a detailed one. It was 'breath able' when I checked it, and that was good enough for me."

"Well, I think I'll run one, for the record." he turned and got busy. I wandered back to the unit to check things there. In another few hours we would be ready to leave this miserable swamp planet.

Back in the cabin, Hank was sitting staring at a slip of paper. He said, "Nothing very unusual. The atmosphere contains 76 percent oxygen, 17 percent nitrogen, and 7 percent methane. There's a lot of water

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in it, too, but I wanted to see what it was on a dry basis. Nothing very interesting there."

"Where'd the methane come from?" I asked.

"I don't know. Out of the swamps maybe. Even on Earth you can find marsh gas, and . . ." Hank stopped talking, and a strange look came over his face. He glanced at the figures again, and shook his head, and began pulling on his lower lip. I can tell Hank is worried when he pulls on his lower lip. He got up and stepped over to the microfilm bank. I went with him; when Hank's worried, I'm worried. He pulled out the spool that carried Lange's Handbook of Chemistry, 49th Edition, looked in the index, and then at a table. When he turned to me his face had gone dead white. I'd never seen Hank so frightened.

I started to ask him what was the matter, but before I could open my mouth he pushed me toward the analyzer and said, "Run an analysis on the atmosphere, see what you get."

Well, I'm supposed to be in charge around here, but at a time like that I feel that it is a good thing to let Hank have his head. I cleared the analyzer and ran the analysis. I'm no chemist, but you don't have to be with that analyzer. I jotted down the figures and handed the slip to Hank. He compared them and sat down and put his head in his hands. I was now seriously concerned. I said to him, "What is it?"

He said through his hands, "That atmosphere out there. It's explosive."

Somehow, I did not understand what he meant. I said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the atmosphere is made up of an explosive mixture of gases. You put a spark to that atmosphere and the whole place will blow up, the whole atmosphere is one big explosive mixture."

I'm a pretty quick thinker, and I saw right away what had him worried. I said, "Wow, I almost lit a cigarette out there. Then I almost burned off the marsh grass. Think how close I came to blowing us up."

Hank didn't say a thing. I said, "Don't worry. Nothing happened. We'll just be more careful in the future." I don't believe in worrying about things that are over and done, and I knew that Hank ought to feel that way too.

"Don't worry?" said Hank. "Okay? I won't worry if you will just tell me how we are going to blast off from this planet."

"Why," I said, "we will have plenty of hydrogen, so we just turn on the reactor and blast off like we . . . we blast off just

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. . . the ship is just . . . the flame . . ." And I saw what Hank meant. The ship's exhaust would light off the atmosphere, and that would be that. I sat down, hard. The more I thought about it, the worse it seemed.

Hank got up and stared out the porthole. "We picked a great place to fuel up. We probably could not find a more miserable, Earth-type planet if we scouted for the next hundred years. Now I know how those creatures out there really feel."

I couldn't even think. The idea of spending the rest of my life on this insect-ridden, swampy, hell-hole, was so deadening that I couldn't even think.

Hank said, "Well, there's got to be a way out. Let's see what we can come up with. Now, the thing is, we've got to keep the hot exhaust out of contact with the atmosphere. The ignition point of the atmosphere is about 1825 degrees C., so we can't let it get that hot."

Just hearing Hank talk, and watching him pace up and down the cramped cabin, made me forget my troubles. After all, Hank was sort of my responsibility; it's up to the Chief to lead the way in things like this. I began to think instead of worry, and right away I had the answer. "Build a shield," I said. "Let's extend the rear nozzle another fifty feet or so. That'll confine the flames and keep the hot gases from . . ." I let my voice trail off. No welding, no brazing, not even a spark in that air. Besides, the hot gas travels a hundred yards astern, easily.

"That's the idea," Hank said. "Except the shield would have to be too long. Instead of a metal shield, maybe we could design a carbon dioxide shield—surround the flame with carbon dioxide, the way some welding flames are shielded."

I nodded, seemed like a good idea. We both fell quiet while we thought it out. Hank said, "With this steady wind blowing, it wouldn' take much of a slip in the gas shield to set off the planet. Don't you think it would have to be a pretty good shield before we could risk it?"

"I guess you're right. We couldn't be certain. No chance to check it out. Well, let's think of something else."

We thought. And we thought. We thought some more. Our hydrogen tank filled, so we disconnected our hydrolysis rig. We ate, and we slept, and we talked, but most of the time we thought. Three days went past and we were no nearer a solution than we had been at first. We covered sheets of paper with all kinds of schemes to keep heat, sparks, and fire away from the atmosphere while we blasted off, but none of them was any good. At

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one point we quit trying to think of any more schemes to get off the planet; we simply relaxed; we went out and played with the black creatures and watched them beg us to take them someplace else. By gestures we succeeded in telling them that we were unable to move as yet. They understood, and brought us food. For some reason, that food turned me cold inside. It was finally borne in on me that I might really spend the rest of my life here after all. I had not really believed it before then. I went back into the ship.

Well, we had hoped that by putting our predicament out of our minds completely, a solution would burst on one of us. It didn't. I said to Hank, "Well, I've about had it. I can't think any more. Let's turn on the disaster beacon. There's one chance in a million that one of the other scouts will hear it and find us."

Hank looked at me strangely—I could tell—and said, "Tell me something. Suppose a scout did find us. Or suppose a transport found us. Or go all the way and suppose that we had the entire Earth technology in orbit around this planet—or even down here with us. With all that, how then could we get off without blowing us and the planet to kingdom come?"

I stared at him. I had never thought of that. You get in the habit of thinking that so long as you are home, or home is near you, everything is all right. Here we were, and as far as I could see, all of Earth's technology could not get us out. It was then that I felt worse than I have ever felt. I was ready to light off the planet, destroy it and myself together. But that would not be fair to Hank.

I lost interest in the ship, and let Hank do the few things that had to be done in the line of maintenance. I sat at the port and stared at the insects and the swamp. At one point Hank grew very quiet. When I looked around I found that he was merely making a study of something or other in our film library. Later on I decided to go out and walk in the swamp. I don't know why; it was just something I had to do. When I suited up, Hank asked where I was going. I didn't see that I had to explain my movements to him, so I said nothing, turned my back on him. As I finished dressing, though, I noticed that Hank was dressed too. He went out the lock with me and walked alongside me as I went down to the water's edge, and beyond. I stood still until the swarm of insects thinned out, and then I tipped back my helmet. Hank did the same. I stared out over the water.

Hank said quietly, "You

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know, a lot of people don't really know the difference between heat and temperature. Take an oven at 350 degrees F. You can thrust your hand right into it and not get burned. But you just thrust your hand into a pot of oil at 350 degrees F. and it will immediately cook the flesh right off your bones. There's a lot more heat in the oil; that's the difference."

I wasn't listening really. I was just staring dumbly out over the shallow water. Hank went on. "You take explosions now. Lots of people don't know what an explosion is. It is never anything more than a fast chemical reaction, one that releases heat and gases, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, on a comparative basis."

I still wasn't listening. Hank pulled out a pack of cigarettes, took one out, and put it in my mouth saying, "Have a cigarette."

I let it hang in my mouth, without thinking. Vaguely I noticed that Hank had his cigarette lighter in his hand. It wasn't until he extended it toward me and I saw his thumb tighten on the striking wheel that I realized what was going on. I started to yell, but Hank spun the wheel and a bright blue flame sprang up on the wick.

I saw the small bubble of light blue fire start from the wick and begin to expand. Like a soap bubble it grew. It swept past my face and I felt the sear of it and I smelt the hairs on my face and head as they burned. I was afraid to move, and I stood motionless waiting for the blast that I was sure would come. The bubble of fire swept beyond me and the bigger it grew the slower it seemed to move. I could hardly see it; the light blue color was just about invisible in the light of the sun. I dared to move and look around me and I could see that Hank and I stood in the center of an ever-growing sphere of fire, but it moved so *slow*.

The sphere was no longer a sphere; the fire could not burn into the ground, so the sphere turned into a growing hemisphere. It looked like an inverted bowl of fire. Even as I waited for something to happen I felt good about what the fire was doing to the insects. The thin wings and legs and thin parts of the bodies of the insects flashed into smoke as the wall of fire touched them. Thick layers of smoldering insects fell to the ground, and the heat left in the wake of the fire charred them and dried them and made them burst into flame, even those in the shrubbery. The tips of the grass and the bushes smoldered, and here and there a momentary

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burst of flame appeared in the swamp vegetation. It was hot, quite hot, but not nearly as hot as we thought it would be. I dropped my helmet and let the suit air conditioner take on the job of keeping me cool and comfortable.

In a minute's time the bowl of fire had only traveled 60 to 70 feet away from me, in all directions. A thin haze of smoke filled the bowl, and the wall of flame was just about impossible to see. Eddy currents began to appear at the edges of the bowl as the hot air inside began to surge upwards. The smooth, bowl shape began to disappear, and the smoke-filled interior began to heave and rise. Fresh atmosphere rushed in near the bottom and took fire. Isolated pockets of near-invisible flame began to grow out at the edges of the bowl of fire, and all symmetry disappeared. But the flames all moved so *slow*.

I pushed my helmet back. It was hot, but bearable. It was smoky, but breathable. I looked around at the slow-spreading jagged edges of the explosion wall, and I couldn't believe how quiet it was. The only sound was the sound of the wind as it pushed back and forth past my head. I heard a splashing sound behind me. I turned and saw one of the creatures standing upright. He raised his arms over his head, and then dropped them and luxuriously scratched his belly. I knew what he meant: he was wallowing in the absence of insects. He dropped into the water to wet himself and then stood up again. All around him others were going through the same wonderful stretching and scratching.

At the end of 5 minutes it had cooled noticeably. The sheets of flame were a hundred yards off in all directions. I felt a few drops of warm rain fall. I looked up and could see small clouds forming and disappearing in the shifting air currents, and I heard Hank say, "I figure that it will take a little better than four hours to burn up to the top of the atmosphere. By that time we ought to have quite a storm here."

I said, "Did you know it would be like this?"

"I wasn't certain. I figured the air temperature would not be too high after the explosive wave passed; most of the heat would radiate to space, some would radiate to the water. And there'd be enough oxygen to breath when it was over. The velocity of propagation of the flame was the thing that set me up to light it off. I found out in the books that the flame velocity was only about one foot per second. We've got just about the slowest traveling explosive

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wave front there is; you can walk faster than that. And let's walk now. I figure there may be some lightening storms around here before long. It'll be safer in the ship."

We went back to the ship. Little particles of soot floated around us as we walked, and it was pleasant to think that they had once been insects.

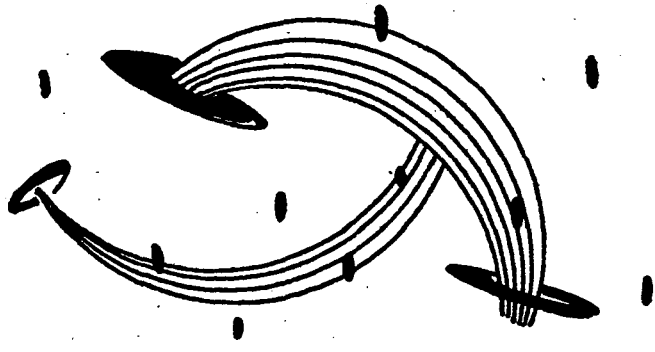
We checked out the ship for take-off and decided to get some sleep before we left; we both needed it right then and there. It was fifteen hours later when we woke. We checked a mile ahead of us through the rain and clouds to make certain none of the creatures were in our path, and then we blasted off. Take-off was normal.

We orbitted once outside the atmosphere, and I looked down as the ship passed over the night side of the forsaken planet.

Great sheets of dim fire reached for hundreds of miles in all directions. Mighty clouds surged through the atmosphere, flickering and dancing from mile-long strokes of lightening that set off new fires. The sheets of fire assumed weird shapes, contorted, twisting, writhing. The planet looked like something alive, something in great and agonizing pain. It was a terrible sight, and I shuddered. But Hank must have known what I was thinking, because he shook his head and said, "No, it is a good thing. It is never easy to be born, but it is a good thing anyway." I didn't argue. I believe in letting my men say what they want.

It wasn't until later, reading the log, that I found that Hank had given the planet a name. He named it Phoenix.

THE END



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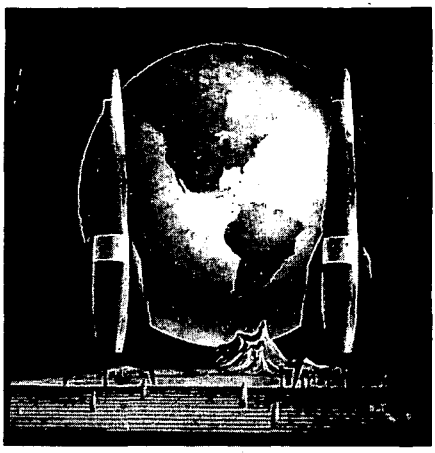

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